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THE MAGAZINE OF SALTWATER FISHING

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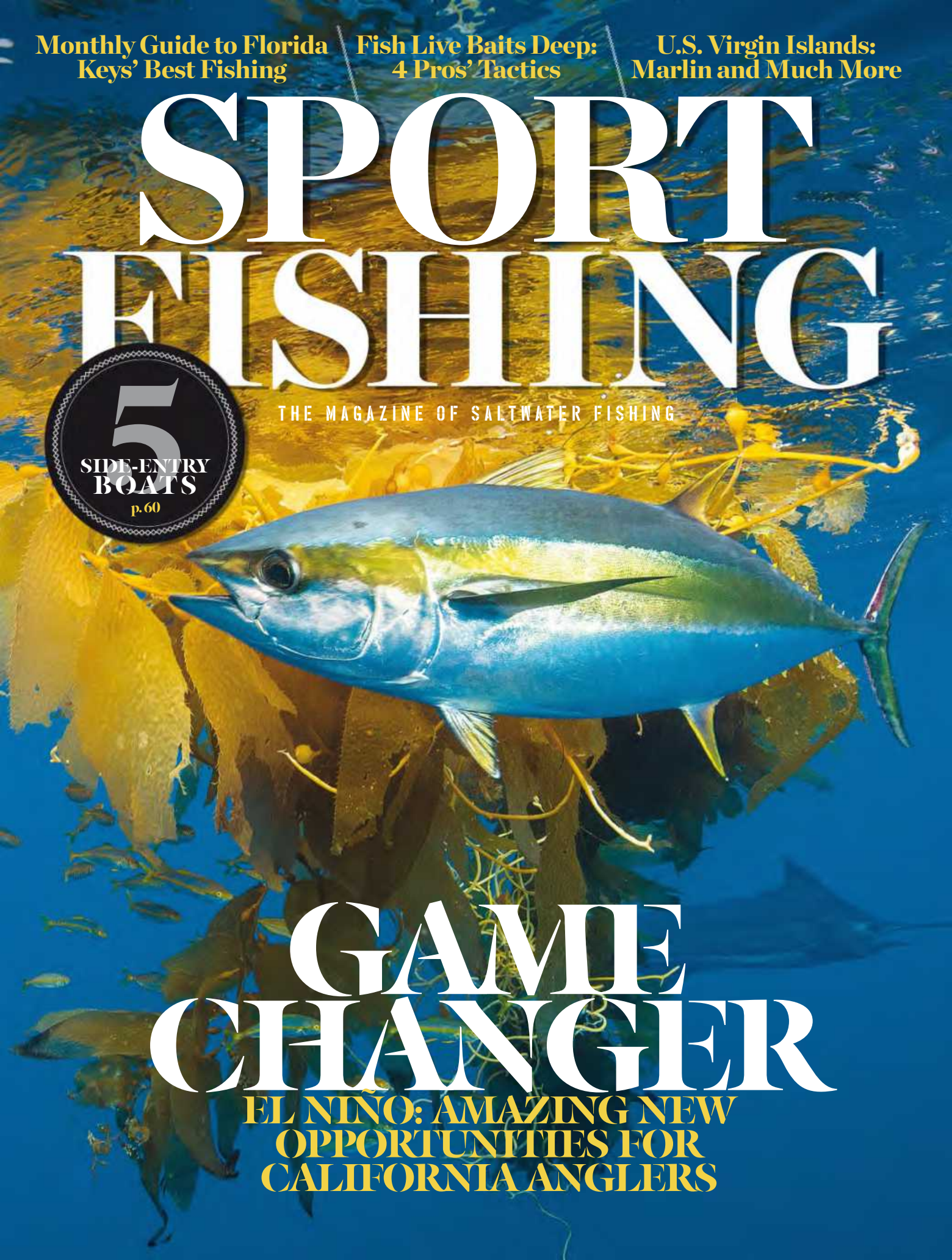

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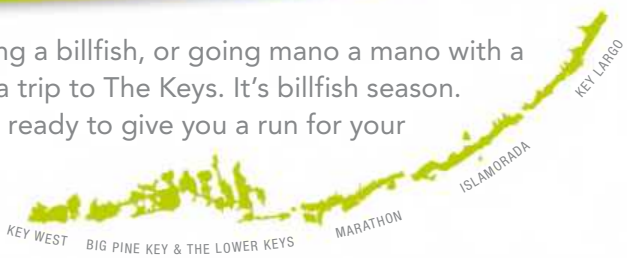

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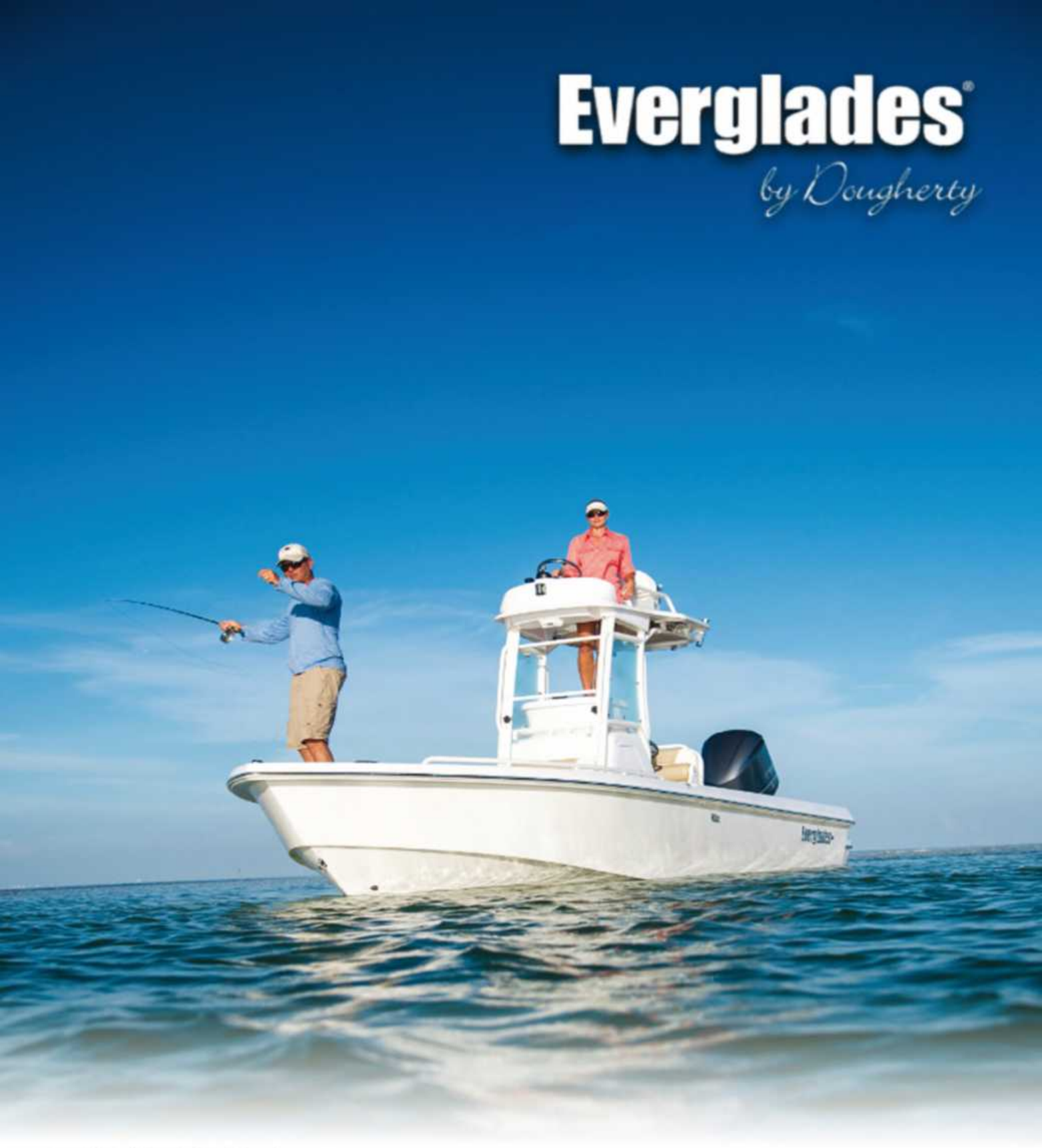

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COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Collateral damage. That's what saltwater-angling enthusiasts have become. It's unfair and counter-productive, but there it is.

Among recreational anglers, the greatest travesty in fisheries management occurs when laws restricting fishing effort are issued with a blanket approach. Thus, in a one-size-fits-all model, fishery managers apply the same restrictions or closures to all fisheries for a given species or in a given area.

With no attempt to distinguish between user groups, this methodology suggests that weekend anglers — who, statistically speaking, release more than half of what they catch and are relatively inefficient as far as what they do catch — are in the same league as factory trawlers and longliners, harvesting tons of targeted fish and, often, tons of bycatch.

The failure to consider the relative impact of sport versus commercial fishing is a global problem. For instance, a recent proposal by the European Commission would impose a six-month moratorium on all fishing for European sea bass (similar to our striped bass) in 2016, and for the subsequent six months allow the commercial fleet a ton of bass per boat each month, and anglers one fish per day.

Ironically, this crisis-management approach to devastated bass stocks came about after years of overfishing, as fishery managers and politicians failed to heed warnings of imminent population collapse. That should sound all too familiar to anyone who has followed cod management in the U.S. Northeast.

And there's more irony in that the anglers being asked to stop fishing for bass altogether were the ones most vocal for years in calling for much tighter catch restrictions on both themselves and big seiners and trawlers, but to no avail. That too should have a familiar ring on this side of the big pond for anglers in groups like the Coastal Conservation Association.

Also familiar: managers failing to distinguish between fisheries. The commercial harvest of European bass in 2014 is reported at 3,510 tons, but given certain loopholes in reporting, that number is surely much higher.

No figures exist for the overall recreational harvest, but considering the inherent challenges in fishing wild North Atlantic coasts for these fish, plus the fact that most fishermen release them, it would be minuscule indeed compared to the commercial take.

Yet fishery managers are quick to say of any effort for bass, "Shut it all down," including the recreational fishery for this most popular marine game fish — which, by the way, is worth 40 to 75 times more per ton of bass harvested than bass caught commercially, according to a study by an independent fisheries consulting firm.

A world away, Palau, the tiny Pacific nation made up of gorgeous islands, has declared all its waters (an area twice the size of Mexico) to be "fully protected." Originally, that country's president declared that catch-and-release world-class sport fishing would be allowed and even encouraged as an economic driver in keeping with the nation's ocean protections.

No longer. I could find no mention of sport fishing in the considerable press generated by the October announcement — only the phrase "no fishing." (This change in thinking seems to have occurred after Pew's increasing involvement and influence, probably not wholly coincidentally.)

So in Palau, as in Europe, Australia and the United States, once again sport fishing becomes collateral damage. The problem has come about because fisheries councils and commissions, politicians, and environmental powerhouses like Pew don't realize or acknowledge the importance and value of sport fishing, or they simply don't care. Trying to fairly accommodate the sport — which is so vastly different from large-scale commercial fishing — in management decisions requires time, money and effort. Why bother, when it's so much easier to just say, "Shut it all down"?

And so anglers continue to be unreasonably and in many (admittedly not all) cases unnecessarily denied access to their sport. Kudos to the groups and individuals fighting to be heard, to be recognized, to be counted. It's an uphill battle, to be sure.

FISHERIES COUNCILS AND COMMISSIONS, POLITICIANS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL POWERHOUSES LIKE PEW DON'T REALIZE THE IMPORTANCE AND VALUE OF SPORT FISHING — OR THEY SIMPLY DON'T CARE.

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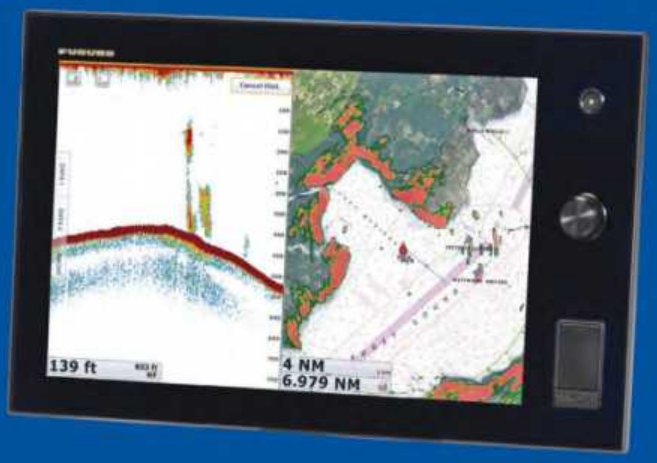

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GAME PLAN

BY SAM HUDSON / JANUARY 2016 / VOL 31 — ISSUE 1

HOOK CHOICE
Different fishing techniques require different styles of hooks. This roosterfish fell for a live bait paired with an in-line circle hook.

A HOOK FOR EVERY SCENARIO

PROS EXPLAIN THEIR FAVORITE STYLES OF HOOKS FOR POPULAR TECHNIQUES WITH NATURAL BAITS.

THE BAIT HOOK that catches an amberjack in Florida is not the same one anglers tie on for roosterfish off Baja or yellowtail in California.

Or is it?

Most anglers agree that bait size determines hook size, so if roughly the same size baits are available across the continent, are hook style and size all that important? The answer is a resounding yes.

Because techniques vary from port to port, top anglers have modified and refined rigs that require specific styles of hooks. One trend that's become a staple with many rigs is the utilization of circle hooks. More and more, anglers are picking circle hooks over J hooks.

I reached out to a diverse group of pro anglers and captains to learn their favorite hook styles when fishing live or dead natural baits.

ADRIAN E. GRAY; PAT FORD (OPPOSITE TOP)

MID-ATLANTIC BOTTOMFISHING

Richard DeMarte, a pro angler and outdoors writer from White Plains, New York, uses only circle hooks to fish his waters in and around Long Island Sound, even replacing treble hooks on his lures. He's found that circles dramatically reduce damage to the fish and don't adversely affect hookup rates.

"Bottomfishing for tautog, porgies and sea bass, I make up rigs with VMC circle hooks from sizes 1/0 to 4/0," says DeMarte. "Top baits are Asian and green crabs for blackfish, and spearing [Atlantic silversides], squid or strip baits for sea bass."

In addition, DeMarte bottomfishes for striped bass and bluefish with VMC 7/0, 8/0 or 9/0 circle hooks and cut bunker (menhaden) chunks in waters from 2 to 60 feet. "By using circle hooks, only three of the 1,300-plus stripers I've landed were gut-hooked and not able to be revived and released," he says.

CHUNKING FOR TUNA AND STRIPERS

When Capt. Bob Cope chunks for tuna offshore of Cape May, New Jersey, he uses only circle hooks because he's learned the hookup-to-landing ratio is much better than with J hooks. Specifically, he prefers to use 4/0 to 6/0 4x-strong Gamakatsu Octopus circles (209416).

However, when trolling, Cope prefers J hooks on his rigged baits as well as his lures.

"To use circles when trolling, the angler must set the drag very light and slowly push the lever home after the bite," he says. "It's not an easy task for the average customer on a charter. With J hooks trolling at 6 knots, the fish is either on or it's not."

For chunking baits to stripers or tossing clams at fat black drum, Cope fishes 8/0 Gamakatsu Octopus circles (208418) on fish-finder rigs. "I've found this is the best option because there's never the question of when to set the hook," he says. "All that is needed is to wait for the rod to fold over and just turn the handle. You'll land over 90 percent of the fish that bite this way."

SOUTH ATLANTIC POPPING CORKS AND MORE

"When fishing shrimp and minnows under a popping cork for specks and reds, I prefer the VMC 7384 Sport circle, matching the bait size with the hook," says Capt. Gary Dubiel, of Oriental, North Carolina. "The thin gauge allows the bait to swim well and penetrates well with lighter-action rods. I also Carolina-rig the 7384 circle for flounder."

The rigid mouth of a tarpon is notorious for deflecting solid hook-sets. Anglers must pick styles able to hold in the soft upper lip to successfully stay connected.

The VMC Sport circle has a bent-out eye for easy leader snells to the hook. When Dubiel isn't using popping corks, he rigs with VMC Tournament circles starting in the 3/0 size.

"We fish weighted cut-bait rigs for reds, and I opt for a 7387 Tournament circle," he says. "For adult redfish, I use the 8386 Tournament circle in 10/0." The 8386 Tournament circle is very strong and large enough for big chunks of mullet and menhaden; plus its shank is in-line, making it easier to release fish healthy.

TROLLING DEAD BAITS

One technique that still incorporates J hooks extensively is trolling natural dead baits such as ballyhoo.

"Our go-to hook here in the Florida Keys is the Mustad 3407 BN 7/0 [J hook] for rigging medium-size ballyhoo, and the 8/0 for the larger horse ballyhoo," says Capt. Jack Carlson, of Marathon. "BN stands for black nickel, the coating on the hook. A Super Strong [SS] model is available if using higher-pound-test main line or targeting larger game fish."

This classic O'Shaughnessy forged hook provides numerous benefits.

"It's a long-shank hook, and when a fish has it in the corner of its mouth, there is less chance to chafe the leader," says Carlson. "Also, the hook sits in the perfect location, toward the mid to back section of the ballyhoo, when rigging through the gills. This hook placement prevents losing short strikes."

GULF COAST SLOW-TROLLING

"When targeting yellowfin tuna early in the year, I tie on a Trokar TK5 non-offset circle in the light-wire model," says Capt. Mike Ellis, of Venice, Louisiana. "You just can't use a heavy-wire hook for yellowfin when the baits are 3 to 5 inches long. I vary the size of the hook depending on the size of the bait."

In fact, Ellis prefers lighter-wire hooks so smaller baits swim better and live longer while trolling. "I will have a few hooks open up at times and may lose a fish or two, but I feel like the lighter hooks get way more bites, so it's an acceptable gamble," he adds.

On the days when the fish are not cooperating, Ellis switches to a 3/0 Trokar TK7 Extreme Live Bait hook and fishes with the rods in gear. "That seems to hook any finicky short-striking tuna," he says.

As the year progresses and the size of the baits grows, Ellis turns to the mid- to heavy-wire Trokars "because they're wicked-sharp and stick in anything they touch."

PACIFIC DRIFT-FISHING

Bobby Martinez, a tournament angler from Los Angeles, made the most of this year's El Niño event by catching wahoo, yellowtail and tuna nearshore while fly-lining. Anglers drifting near kelp marked fish on the meter or spotted bait schools, dolphin or large sharks such as hammerheads.

"The fish were as close as 8 miles off LA, with plenty of bluewater close to shore," he says. "You didn't have to go to the banks, because clean water was so close to shore."

The bait size dictated what type of hook Martinez used. For anchovies, often 3 inches long, he prefers 1/0 Owner Ringed Flyliner or Owner Offshore hooks. For fly-lining sardines, he moves to 2/0 to 4/0 hooks. Mackerel were around too, giving anglers the opportunity to make bait most of the summer. Martinez preferred 5/0 to 7/0 Owner Mutu ringed circles when the tuna hit bigger baits.

"For chunking, I like the Offshore hook from Owner," he says. "It's offset and really acts like a bait-keeper for the chunk of bait.

"Warm waters, as warm as 77 degrees, brought the fish north," Martinez explains. "But the warm water has a negative effect on keeping the bait lively, so anglers sometimes had to use smaller and lighter hooks than normal to keep baits alive."

The long shank of a J hook allows anglers to rig ballyhoo (skirted or naked) so predators are unable to short-strike the popular natural baits. A second rigged J hook provides additional hook-setting confidence.

ADRIAN E. GRAY

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FISH FACTS

BY DOUG OLANDER / JANUARY 2016 / VOL 41—ISSUE 1

FISH FACTS ARCHIVES

BLACK JACK

(Caranx lugubris)

Found in all the world's tropical seas, the black jack is every bit as tough and powerful as it looks, and can always be counted on for a grueling fight. Although eaten in some places, black jacks have been implicated in ciguatera poisonings. The IGFA world record, caught in 2013 at Hurricane Bank off Mexico, weighed 41 pounds, 7 ounces.

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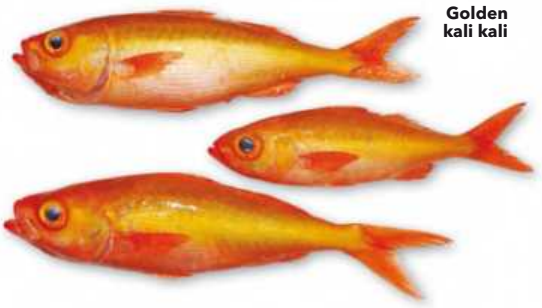

Golden kali kali

GOLLY! IT'S A KALI!

Q While my dad, Bobby McDonough, and I were bottomfishing in very deep water off the Kona Coast, we caught these red-and-yellow fish. Someone told me they were golden kali kali, but they don't really look like kali kali. They also seem to be very rare. What are they, and do you catch them only in Hawaii?

Conor McDonough
Kamuela, Hawaii

A You and your dad have caught some golden kali kali, *Erythrocles scintillans*, also known as golden rovers. These fish are members of the family Emmelichthyidae (rovers and redbaits), a group of 17 species of baitfish-size deepwater fishes that grow to a maximum size of around 12 inches long. Golden kali kali occur throughout the Pacific Ocean near coral reefs, at depths between 300 and 2,000 feet. Little is known about the biology of this species except for the fact that it feeds largely on plankton and probably follows the vertical movements of plankton layers toward the surface at night.

In places like Australia, where deepwater trawl fisheries for the closely related redbait (*Emmelichthys nitidus*) are planned, biologists found that the redbait matured at between 6 to 9 inches long, and the females spawned once every three or so days over a protracted spawning period during the spring months. ***– Ben Diggles***

BEWARE FISH BEARING SCALPELS

Q South of Cerralvo Island, near La Paz, Mexico, we caught these things while chumming with small pieces of bonito. They were hanging out underneath mackerel, but we were lucky to get one; I think they have good eyesight and are line-shy. Can you make the ID on this fish?

Gary Evans
Santa Ana, California

A Gary, the yellow pectoral fin, deeply forked tail, and blue margin along the back and belly can only mean you have caught a yellowfin surgeonfish, *Acanthurus xanthopterus*. Although it is found in the tropics throughout the world, your catching it off La Paz is somewhat unusual, as it is (or at least used to be) relatively rare that far north. Yellowfin reach about 2 feet long and live on reefs and sand from the barely subtidal zone down to maybe 300 feet. You can see them in schools, poking along while feeding on algae and small organisms. Like other surgeonfishes, this species has a razor-sharp, but not venomous, spine just forward of the tail, which serves as a defense against such predators as sharks and groupers. Interestingly, this is apparently

Yellowfin surgeonfish

one of the few surgeonfish species that is often taken on hook and line. ***– Milton Love***

AN AFRICAN IN NEW ENGLAND

Q While fishing for speckled trout in Pensacola, Florida, Kathy Hall boated this fish. I have fished in this area for more than 50 years and have never caught anything like it. My first thought was an African pompano; however, I don't believe they live this far north. We released the little fellow to grow a little bigger.

Walter Fink
Pensacola, Florida

A Walter, your fish is indeed an African pompano, *Alectis ciliaris*. These do in fact range pretty far north, occasionally reaching New England. In fact, they're found worldwide in tropical and temperate seas. Although a member of the jack family, the species is not in the same group as the true pompanos (genus *Trachinotus*), and as such, they are not nearly as prized for food as their cousins are. They get pretty large as well, topping 40 pounds. The IGFA all-tackle record is 50 pounds, 8 ounces, from Daytona Beach, Florida.

African pompano

But perhaps the most fascinating feature of these guys is those fin streamers trailing off the dorsal and anal spines. When the fish are very small, say a couple of inches, their streamers may reach a foot in length and trail gracefully behind. At this stage, they often travel in pairs and present a delightful sight. As they age, the streamers become less pronounced, and are barely noticeable in adults, although the fins themselves are a respectable length.

African pompano stay in coastal areas as adults, but the juveniles travel pretty much with the ocean currents, sometimes traveling nearshore, and at other times may even be considered pelagic. ***– Bob Shipp***

Rapurata-yumekasago

FISH WITH NO NAME

Q A while back I was fishing on a boat in the Gulf of Mexico off Alabama. While we were deep-dropping, this colorful little fellow came up on a hook baited with squid. I honestly don't remember the exact depth, but I'm thinking it was 600 to 800 feet or so.

David Miller
Storrs, Connecticut

A I can't be certain of the species from the photograph, but your catch is a member of the genus *Helicolenus*, and is probably *H. lahillei*. The species is little-known and doesn't have a common name in English. (Its common name in Japanese is *rapurata-yumekasago*.) Some ichthyologists once considered it a subspecies of the blackbelly rosefish, *H. dactylopterus*, but it is now usually accorded species status. *Helicolenus lahillei* is a member of the family Sebastidae, which includes the rockfishes. These are closely related to scorpionfishes (family Scorpaenidae) and also possess venomous spines. *H. lahillei* is purported to be good table fare, and a commercial fishery exists for this species in the waters off Patagonia. What I find particularly interesting about your catch from the Gulf of Mexico is that *H. lahillei* is known to range from southern Brazil south to Argentina, at depths between 265 and 710 feet. It has not been reported elsewhere, likely due to limited fishing in its depth range. Many cold-water marine organisms, including fishes, live at progressively greater depths as their populations approach the equator; this may also hold true for *H. lahillei*. ***– Ray Waldner***

GEAR GUIDE

BY SAM HUDSON / JANUARY 2016 / VOL 31 — ISSUE 1

The allure of a lure doesn't matter if its split rings are destroyed by your target species. Some productive lures come with quality split rings like this Shimano jig; others don't – know when to upgrade.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

THE DIMINUTIVE SPLIT RING IS A CRUCIAL CONNECTION POINT — DON'T MAKE IT THE WEAKEST LINK

ONE OF THE tiniest pieces of fishing tackle can make all the difference between landing and losing a fish. The gear is so small it doesn't register on a bathroom scale.

"We were casting in an area that held some really big tuna," says Capt. Josh Zacharias, of Cape Cod's Outermost Angling Charters. "My client launched a cast, and an estimated 800-pound bluefin crashed his topwater lure. The explosion was as fierce as you might imagine."

After the fish made two or three blistering runs with the boat in pursuit, Zacharias' angler locked down the drag and started to regain line on his Shimano Stella's spool. That's when the lure came unbuttoned.

"We noticed the forward treble hook was missing from the lure," Zacharias recalls. "Though the split ring was still there, it looked like a paper clip that had been straightened."

Targeting tuna strong enough to give even heavy tackle a workout can lead to unexpected gear failures, but the missed tuna in this extreme example shows just how important split rings are to anglers. "These days, I try not to target the larger fish on lighter tackle for this reason, but we still hook them from time to time," Zacharias says.

BILL DOSTER (4)

Zacharias has modified his tuna-plugging rigs over the years, never once shying from split rings. Twelve feet of 100-pound-test wind-on leader ties to a 230-pound Spro swivel. Between the lure and swivel, he attaches an Owner Hyper Wire split ring. The split-ring-and-swivel combination allows for quick lure changes with help from sturdy hands and pliers.

Split rings come in different weights, materials and sizes; understanding the options available allows you to pick the right ring for your style of fishing. Split rings are most commonly used to attach lures to the leader or hooks to a lure. To cover most classes of fish, top manufacturers produce split rings from 10- to 420-pound-test.

BENDING STEEL

A split ring starts as a straight piece of round wire.

"It's essentially a spring," says Jack Butts, president of Rosco Terminal Tackle. "Split rings are fabricated on the same type of machine. Our coil is made and then cut with either 30- or 45-degree ends."

Rings are then tempered at high temperatures to achieve the hardness of steel needed so they can withstand their force rating, adds Tony Shitanishi, marketing manager of Owner American Corporation.

For anglers who want to upgrade split rings on their plugs, quality manufacturers such as VMC, Owner, Rosco and Worth offer options in different pound strengths.

ROSCO
Stainless

WORTH
Stainless

OWNER
Hyper Wire Stainless

Stainless steel, with its corrosion-resistant properties, is the best material for heavy-duty saltwater rings. Popular brands and models include VMC SSSR stainless-steel split rings, Spro Power split rings, Rosco split rings and Owner's new Ultra split rings.

The gauge of wire determines the strength, points out Syd Rives, sales manager of Spro Corp. Thankfully, most manufacturers list the ring's size and pound-test on the packaging. A typical ring size for larger yellowfin tuna is VMC's No. 6 split ring, testing 231 pounds.

Different manufacturers I interviewed all agreed that circular rather than oval split rings are the most versatile and strongest shape. The dependable circular shape allows anglers to easily attach lures or hooks while providing better freedom of movement, says Rives. One manufacturer felt that oval split rings are a current fad that likely won't have much staying power.

"Strengthwise, circular is the strongest shape because there is even distribution of force around the ring when pulling, as opposed to an oval split ring that can stress the ring in some places more than others," explains Shitanishi. "The ring is only as strong as the weakest point."

RINGS IN ACTION

Split rings have a number of uses when it comes to plugs. First off, we all have a favorite lure model or manufacturer that might not incorporate hardware up to snuff for the style of fishing we prefer.

"Some lure manufacturers will use a cheaper ring on their products," says Butts. "This is apparent by corrosion, flaking of the finish, and rings not closing back because they have been overstretched. Sometimes it's necessary to replace the split rings on your favorite lure."

A quick swap-out of split rings at the hook hangers, and even of the hooks too (see Gear Guide, November), turns an unreliable lure into a go-to plug. Too

SOLID VS. SPLIT

Anytime an angler uses a split ring, there's some risk of chafing the knot at the split ring's ends or of the knot slipping out of the split ring itself. That's why some anglers use a solid or welded ring, especially when working metal jigs or casting iron offshore.

For example, the line-tie on metal jigs that feature assist hooks is a solid metal ring; it provides the most secure connection while jigging once a fish is hooked.

Regional iron used on the West Coast are sold with solid, not split, rings.

"The torque from twisting against a hard, bony jaw while battling wahoo hooked on casting lures has a frequent tendency to open the split rings," says Capt. Tim Ekstrom, of San Diego's Royal Star Long-Range Sportfishing. "Nowadays soldered rings are used in our fishery. The welded rings, with very few exceptions, do not fail."

Iron such as the Tady, Salas, Sumo and Raider are all sold on the tackle shelves prepared with welded rings.

"The only time now that we'll use a split ring is if a welded eye loop breaks or is compromised when the fish is landed," says Ekstrom. "The swimming-type iron all require a ring at the tie-end to create the action that attracts the strike. Typically the rings on those style lures have a larger diameter than the vast majority of the split rings that I've seen."

A quality split ring, such as the new stainless-steel VMC SSSR (pictured), can attach at the nose of a twitchbait to increase lure action and attraction. The split ring at the rear of the lure (right) allowed the single hook to connect in the corner of this striper's mouth.

ADRIAN E. GRAY

many anglers cast a plug without even considering possible modifications.

While those split-ring pliers are out, add a split ring to the line-tie of the lure. VMC's LTSR line-tie split ring is a tear-drop option. Swimming plugs often need split rings at the line-tie, as do sinking glide baits and wakebaits that rely on action beneath the water's surface. Shy away from split rings with topwater baits — a ring can actually make the bait nose-heavy, disrupting the lure's action.

"If you are walking a bait on top, most anglers prefer the direct line-tie so you have a better feel for your lure and are able to snap it back and forth quickly with direct force," says Shitanishi. "Some anglers prefer split rings on lipped and vibrating baits so the bait can oscillate better while being reeled in one direction."

One last tip, not related to plugs: Consider adding a split ring to a live-bait hook before tying it to the leader. "Adding a split ring to the hook enables better natural bait action in the water," says Rives. Of course, some hooks now come with a solid ring already attached at the eye — a similar approach to provide increased action while baitfishing.

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NEW PRODUCTS

BY CHRIS WOODWARD / JANUARY 2016 / VOL 31 — ISSUE 1

1. ADDED BENEFITS

With successful Helix 5 and 7 launches under its belt, **Humminbird** has expanded this multifunction-display family to include **9-** and **10-inch** models plus a **12-inch CHIRP** version. All come with side-imaging, down-imaging and 360-imaging compatibility and are Ethernet-capable, allowing multiple units aboard to share data and enabling a Minn Kota i-Pilot Link connection. The Helix 12 CHIRP allows anglers to select multiple bandwidth settings between the 28 and 540 kHz frequency ranges. Available in multiple configurations, these non-touch-screen Helix units cost $699.99 to $2,299.99.

2. LIVE LARGE

Okuma has added three new sizes – **50W**, **80W** and **130** – to its **Makaira Special Edition** (SEa) conventional reel lineup. The key differences between the SEa models and the gold Makaira lineup appear in the spool bearings, handle sizes and gear ratios. Where gold Makairas use grease on the spool bearings, the green SEas use oil, which improves free-spool (for live-bait applications). The new SEa models use larger handle arms and low-speed gear ratios. The 50W holds 900 yards of 50-pound mono; the 80W holds 1,000 yards of 80; and the 130 holds 1,570 yards of 80. The aluminum reels cost $649.99, $889.99 and $1,199.99.

MORE NEW PRODUCTS
Visit our Gear section at
sportfishingmag.com/new-prods.

3. CAMO CARRIER

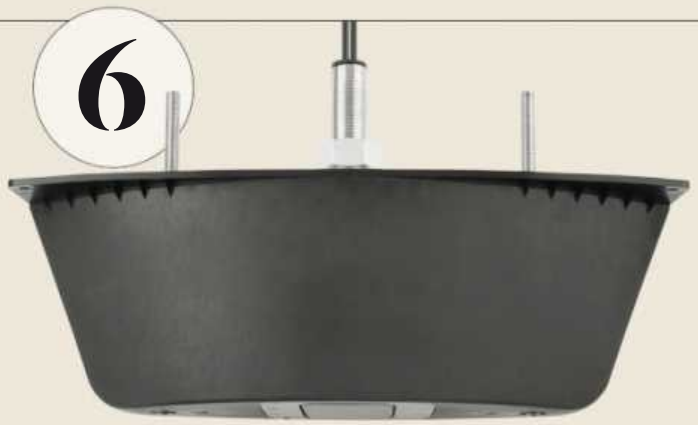
Grundens' Gage **Rum Runner backpack**, pictured in striking Kryptek camouflage, features 30 liters of interior space and is made from 500-denier PVC tarpaulin fabric with RG-welded seams and a waterproof roll-top closure. The moisture-wicking, padded back panel offers comfort while you carry your gear from parking lot to dock or down a long stretch of beach. The pack also comes with a front mesh pocket and two water-bottle pockets, great assets for anglers who want to keep a few essentials handy. The pack costs $97.99.

4. SHALLOW-WATER STICKS

Daiwa's new **Proteus inshore rods** are built with high-modulus carbon graphite and the company's exclusive high-volume-fiber, low-resin design for lightweight strength. Available in spinning and trigger versions, the one-piece rods range in power from ML to XXH and in lengths from 7 feet 6 inches to 8 feet. They sport Fuji alconite-ring guides with K-shape Tangle Free frames, Fuji reel seats, and hybrid grips of cork and EVA. Proteus rods cost $189.95 and $199.95.

5. NEW WEAVE

Ande says its new **Braid** is a unique formulation that's neither Spectra nor Dyneema. It's an eight-strand, graphite-colored line that comes in pound-tests from 20 to 150. The 20-pound-test braid diameter equals that of 4-pound-test mono. Ande says Braid creates very little guide noise and is colorfast. Available in 300-, 600- and 3,000-meter spools, the line costs $39.99 to $300.



6. SEE THROUGH

Garmin's Panoptix all-seeing sonar technology can now be paired with a through-hull down transducer, the **PS60**. Previously, the only options included transom- or trolling-motor mounts. The PS60 offers three of Panoptix's views: LiveVü Down, RealVü 3D Down and RealVü 3D Historical. It comes with a stainless-steel stem, fairing block, and mounting hardware for a boat with a deadrise up to 25 degrees, and is equipped with an internal heading-reference sensor that constantly adjusts the sonar beams to compensate for boat motion. The PS60 costs $3,999.99.

7. SHARP SECRETS

Titan Knife Technologies says its **titanium fillet knives** rarely need sharpening and never rust. They feature an expanding-oval-geometry handle that's coarse-feeling for more confident, nonslip control, and a convex grind that keeps more metal behind the edge. When the knife needs a touch-up, any sharpening tool (used only on one side of the blade) keeps the edge sharp. Seven knife options include 6- to 10-inch lengths and straight or curved styles. (A 9-inch curved fillet knife is pictured.) At press time, Titan was offering holiday pricing ranging from $39.98 to $69.98. Personalize your knife with a laser-engraved name or logo for $4.98.

BILL DOSTER (BOTTOM, 2)

IGFA PENDING WORLD RECORDS

A

From the deep reefs off Long Key, Florida, comes a pending all-tackle record for a **28-pound queen snapper [A]**. Capt. Chris B. Walter of Long Key made the catch last September, dropping squid for bait. If approved, it would replace the current 27-pound, 4-ounce snapper caught off Islamorada, Florida, in 2008.

A tough **36-pound, 6-ounce longfin jack crevalle [B]** has been approved as the all-tackle record for angler Marco Cuoto of Luanda, Angola, who fought the fish for 20 minutes after hooking it on a soft-plastic shad bait last June while fishing Angola's Barra do Kwanza.

B

While fishing Chesapeake Bay last September, Vic Gaspeny of Tavernier, Florida, muscled in a **49.2-inch (125-centimeter) red drum [C]**. He'd been bottomfishing with cut bait. If approved, the length-record catch retires the 46-inch red drum caught in 2012.

Trolling the waters of New Guinea's lower Aramia River last September, Josh Pearson of St. Huberts Island in New South Wales, Australia, caught a **34.3-inch (87-centimeter) Papuan black snapper [D]** (aka black bass) on a Halco Scorpion plug. That's now pending as the first-ever all-tackle length record.

C

D

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Invasive species: Record numbers of dorado (mahi) in 2015 poured into the freakishly warm Pacific off Southern California, joined by wahoo and blue marlin – game fish seldom seen here previously.

DOUG PERRINE

PARADIGM SHIFT

HOW A WARMING PACIFIC OCEAN IS PROVING A HUGE AND HISTORIC GAME CHANGER FOR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ANGLERS

BY ERIK LANDESFEIND

ON MOST MORNINGS, DAWN OVER NEWPORT HARBOR IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA IS A DRAB AND GRAY AFFAIR, BUT THIS MORNING IN THE FALL OF 2015 WAS DIFFERENT. THE USUAL MARINE LAYER HAD BEEN REPLACED BY SCATTERED CLOUDS AND ENOUGH MOISTURE IN THE AIR TO TURN THE BAY INTO A TROPICAL PARADISE. DESPITE A BIT OF MORNING CHILL, THE WEATHER JUST DIDN'T FEEL RIGHT FOR EARLY OCTOBER. BUT THEN AGAIN, WHY SHOULD IT? NOTHING ABOUT SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S WEATHER OR ITS FISHING HAD BEEN NORMAL IN QUITE SOME TIME.

As we made our way toward the harbor mouth aboard Capt. Jimmy Decker's Everglades 243 (***fishingwithdecker.com***), I couldn't help but think how this trip was like many I'd made this year — a last-minute, seat-of-the-pants outing in pursuit of fish that had shown up in conditions never before experienced in this part of the Pacific.

This morning Decker and I would be doing something that, after a lifetime of fishing Southern California waters, I never thought I'd be doing: trolling for wahoo. And we'd be doing it well within sight of the Fashion Island skyline in Newport Beach.

MONTH OF THE CALIFORNIA WAHOO

Before long, we started to see a few flying fish pop up and sail away from the boat. As I watched a bigger one soar off into the distance, I spotted a kelp paddy. When we drove past, Decker pointed out the brilliant hues of dorado. As soon as the outside jig passed the paddy, one of the rods loaded up, and a dorado broke the surface in flashes of gold and green.

After resetting our spread, we made another pass and were immediately bit again, but this time it wasn't a dorado. Line melted off the spool quickly as Decker grabbed the rod. By the time I cleared the spread, the fish was a hundred yards away. The next few minutes were spent regaining line only to lose it again, but in shorter and shorter bursts, until we eventually stuck the gaff in the first wahoo that either of us had ever caught in California waters.

As it turned out, many anglers ended up catching their first "local" wahoo over the next few weeks, when fishing proved nothing short of amazing. By late October, 243 wahoo had been landed by sport-fishing boats in California

Capt. Jimmy Decker has reason to be proud, accomplishing a feat few other anglers ever have – landing a wahoo off the California coast.

ERIK LANDESFEIND (LEFT), RICHARD HERRMANN

waters. All the more amazing was the average size of these fish: 40 to 60 pounds was the norm, and 80-pounders were common. The biggest wahoo score came aboard the charter boat *Legend* out of H&M Landing, where 10 anglers tallied 29 wahoo on a three-quarter-day trip. Even with such catches, private boaters probably accounted for 10 times as many of the giant mackerel as the sport boats. October 2015 will go down in history as the month of the California wahoo.

NEW 'HOOD FOR BLUE MARLIN

After the requisite high-fives and photos of our fish, Decker slid the 45-pounder into the fish box and said, "We've still got an hour and a half before the 11 a.m. high tide. What do you say we run out to the Avalon Bank and try to catch a blue marlin?"

The idea of trolling for blue marlin in Southern California waters would have sounded crazy to me before 2015. But on that morning it made perfect sense, so I answered, "Sure, why not?"

"There have been blue marlin caught in U.S. waters in the past," explains Greg Stotesbury, sales manager for AFTCO, "but until 2015, there really haven't been enough of them around to target effectively. The fish were available in our waters for several months leading up to the September full moon, when we enjoyed the best action.

"A lot of fish were caught during that week," Stotesbury says, "and several 600-plus-pound blues were brought to the scales. On September 26, my friend Aaron Gross caught a 618-pound marlin on his 24-foot Skipjack, *High Tide*. Next

A CHANGING FISHERY – BY THE NUMBERS *

YEAR	YELLOWFIN	BLUEFIN	YELLOWTAIL	DORADO	WAHOO
2013	54,251	63,350	169,520	17,517	0
2014	255,034	26,311	176,023	22,089	29
2015*	186,888	23,724	169,557	37,256	243

*Based on commercial sport-fishing boat reports; for 2015, totals include catches made prior to October 25.

ANALYSIS: In looking at catch data from 2013 and 2014, the transition from a cold- to warm-water cycle is evident with an increase in yellowfin and a decrease in bluefin landings. In 2015, the yellowfin and bluefin tuna counts were both down from the previous year, but the average size of the fish was significantly larger. Bluefin also extended their range to provide anglers as far north as the Bay Area with some unexpected and, by midautumn, surprisingly consistent fishing.

Throughout most of the year, catches of both species averaged 30 to 40 pounds, with much larger fish being caught regularly. The yellowtail numbers have remained steady over the last three years, but the average size of the fish has increased dramatically. During a normal year, the bulk of the yellowtail catch comprises fish under 15 pounds, but starting in fall 2014 and continuing through 2015, the average yellowtail size was 20 to 25 pounds. Dorado catches increased right alongside the wahoo catches in 2014 and 2015, as two years of unusually warm water shifted their ranges north into California waters.

Almost unknown in these waters previously, in 2015 enough blue marlin followed warm water up from the south that anglers actually began to target them.

Tackle busters: While school bluefin tuna hadn't been strangers to Southern California waters, numbers of triple-digit fish – like the one below – were never before as common as they proved to be in 2015.

day it was my crew's turn: We got a 430-pounder on my 25-foot Skipjack, *KawaKawa*. Both of those fish were caught within a few miles of the beach, between Dana Point and Oceanside."

STRIPED MARLIN: AS GOOD AS IT GETS

In fall 2015, pros like Stotesbury noted that marlin spread out and even continued their march northward. In midautumn, Stotesbury says, "There [were] blue marlin as far north as the Channel Islands. We fished up there the second weekend in October and released a 200-pound-class blue that we hooked while running to the anchorage at Santa Cruz Island."

But it wasn't just about blues. Aside from producing the occasional blue marlin, the northerly waters off Anacapa and Santa Cruz islands produced the best striped marlin fishing that anyone has seen in California — ever.

"The striped marlin fishing up there was as good as it gets," Stotesbury confirms. "Last weekend we had 11 releases and are approaching 50 stripes for the season on our boat. There were so many fish that you could just drift and fish baits on the kite or fly line. There have been times when boats had as many as five fish hooked at a time."

MULTIPLE PHENOMENA WARM THE PACIFIC

The wahoo bite I enjoyed off Orange County with Capt. Decker was one of many unprecedented phenomena during 2015 in the history of Southern California sport fishing.

Much of that amazing action was credited to El Niño by anglers and the media alike. But while there was an El Niño occurring, that alone doesn't explain the chain of events leading up to all the newfound fisheries of that year.

Scientific consensus points to high-pressure ridging in the Gulf of Alaska as the real culprit, starting in the winter of 2012-2013 and re-establishing itself in the winters of 2013-2014 and 2014-2015. This unusual weather pattern disrupted the North Pacific storm track and, along with bringing a lasting drought to California, is believed to have led to the creation of the warm-water "Pacific blob."

A meteorologist who calls himself the Fishing Weatherman (***thefishingweatherman.com***), Chris Dunn has been watching developments in the Pacific for some time. The blob has become self-propagating, he says. "In very basic terms, the water temperatures off the California coast are controlled by a combination of currents and cold-water upwelling.

"In a normal year," Dunn explains, "the water warms during the summer months, then cools when wind from winter storms causes upwelling. But over the last several years, the storm track hasn't been lined up in a way that would do that. This lack of an active winter storm cycle has led to a lack of cold-water upwelling, so the water continued to warm and the blob continued to grow."

First detected in 2013, that blob has grown from a 500-mile-diameter zone in the Gulf of Alaska to now cover more than 2,000 miles off the coast from Mexico to Alaska.

RICHARD HERRMANN (TOP), RON BALLANTI (LEFT), COURTESY MATTHEW UPTON / ROFFS; DATA FROM NASA OCEAN BIOLOGY / OB.DAAC (OPPOSITE)

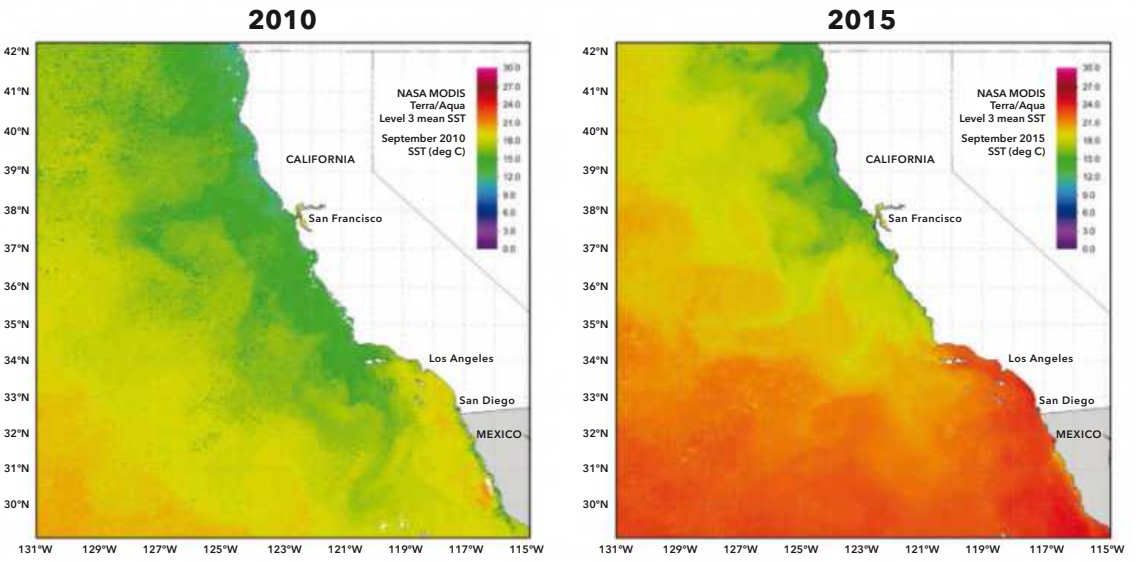
To better explain the effects of the blob, Dunn offers a comparison: "I did a quick analysis of historical data from the ocean-water temperature at the San Clemente Basin buoy [about 42 nautical miles west of San Diego]. Over the 10-year period from 2004 to 2013, the average water temperature for the first few days of April remained between 59 and 60 degrees. In 2014, it was 62.6 degrees, and in 2015, 65.5 degrees. To put those temperatures into perspective, back in 2012 we really didn't hit that temperature mark until mid-July."

BIGGER BLUEFIN BREAK LINES AND HEARTS

For Southern California anglers, that unusually warm water translated into some hot early-season offshore action, which I had the chance to experience while fishing with Decker in June. We'd run a mere 20 minutes from the harbor when Decker said, "We're a little short of the 14-mile bank, but I'm going to drop the jigs in here." He'd caught jumbo bluefin earlier at the same waypoint.

> **"WHILE THERE WAS AN EL NIÑO OCCURRING, THAT ALONE DOESN'T EXPLAIN THE CHAIN OF EVENTS LEADING TO ALL THE NEWFOUND FISHERIES OF THAT YEAR.**

Those bluefin were among many schools of huge (for California) bluefin that seemingly showed up out of nowhere and left everyone wishing they'd brought heavier tackle. "Back in early June, there were spots of 30- to 40-pound bluefin and yellowfin popping up on anchovy schools around here. It was basically



This comparison, prepared by Roffer's Ocean Fishing Forecasting Service, shows the Pacific off California in 2010 – the most recent La Niña year – with 2015, the year of both an El Niño and the hot Pacific "blob." Water temperatures are in degrees Celsius (0 to 30 degrees C = 32 to 86 degrees F). The difference, particularly off the southern half of the state, speaks volumes about the northward shift in many warm-water species.

WAS 2015 THE NEW NORMAL FOR SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA FISHING?

With everyone shouting about El Niño, it's easy enough to chalk up this year's incredible fishing as a byproduct of that equatorial weather pattern. But meteorologist Jan Null, of Golden Gate Weather Service, disagrees.

"There continues to be the misconception that because El Niño has something to do with warmer-than-normal water somewhere in the Pacific, and the waters along the California coast are warmer than normal, then they must be related," Null says. "They're not! The current warm-water anomalies along the California coast first showed up in February 2014, but the tropical Pacific didn't reach minimal El Niño strength until November 2014."

So what does this mean for the fishermen? According to marine biologist Lyall Bellquist of the Scripps Institute of Oceanography in La Jolla, California, El Niño might not affect the fishing as much as you'd think. "One thing we learned in 2014 was that you don't necessarily need to have a high El Niño index to experience similar sea-surface temperatures and excellent offshore fishing," Bellquist says. "But 2013 and 2014 were unprecedented in terms of species, sizes and proximity to shore without any El Niño influence. There's a decent chance that, because our current El Niño arrived in the fall of 2015, it could stretch the excellent fishing deep into winter. Storms associated with El Niño, however, could mix things up a bit."

Uncertainty about those winter storms is a major reason weather experts like meteorologist Chris Dunn keep from making a prediction for 2016. "Because there are a number of variables that control water temperature and the movement of migratory fish, it's tough to say if we'll see a 'three-peat' continuing the last couple of years.

"Oceans take quite a while to heat up and cool down, so it would take a drastic change of events to kick things back to what is considered normal in just one season," Dunn says. "The bottom line is that this season's fishing may have been the peak, and with a more active storm track this winter, I'd expect to see our water temps a little closer to normal next year. Will we see wahoo on three-quarter-day trips? That might never happen again in our lifetimes. But who would ever have believed such a thing was possible in the first place?"

Hammerhead sharks, like this one off the California coast, were yet another historically infrequent visitor that showed up in unprecedented numbers.

Dorado proved more abundant than ever before, and over a longer period, leaving anglers like Ron Ballanti hoping for a repeat in 2016.

run-and-gun bird-school fishing [following feeding birds, in local parlance], and the tuna were only biting the jigs," Decker says.

"One of the schools I pulled up on ended up being all 100- to 200-pound fish," he adds. "I hooked one on the first cast with a Shimano Colt Sniper on my light jig stick. That fish immediately spooled me, so I grabbed my heaviest rod and tied on another jig. The whole time this was happening, the bluefin were blowing out so close to the boat that it sounded like I was fishing next to a waterfall. I ended up getting bit on the first cast again with the heavy gear, and never slowed that one down either. After that I pretty much gave up and went looking for some smaller fish to catch."

Decker wasn't the only one to run into this problem. Many reports poured in of lopsided battles between anglers and oversize bluefin tuna during the months of June and July, unheard of off Southern California until last summer.

TUNA'S NEW TIMETABLE

But even more unlikely, bluefin (if not all triple-digit fish) had originally showed up months earlier. Capt. Duane Mellor of Pinnacle Sportfishing (***pinnaclesportfishing.com***) was one of the first to get on these fish. On April 1, he ran into a school of them just a few miles off the coast of San Diego and landed 18 fish to 50 pounds while suffering losses on larger ones.

After spending the next several months targeting those fish, Mellor noted that they were acting very differently than bluefin tuna normally do in our waters. "The bluefin were keyed in on anchovies too small to use as bait," he says, "and it was almost impossible to get one to bite a sardine. For the first few months, every single fish we caught came on the surface iron — light metal jigs like a Tady 45.

"To hook one, you had to cut way outside the school, shut down, wait for them to get into casting range, and then make a long cast to them. If you didn't get bit in the first couple of turns of the handle, you weren't going to get bit. And if you were lucky enough to get bit, you were going to be in for a battle if you hooked a bigger one. That first day, I hooked a good one on a 10-foot jig stick. It broke my rod after an hour and a half and came off just out of gaff range. It was brutal."

In time, anglers did figure out how to target these bluefin with proper tackle, and the stories changed from the agony of defeat to the thrill of catching the fish of a lifetime. "The biggest hurdle was getting them to eat a live bait," explains Stotesbury. "We started out using small two-speed reels full of 65-pound braid, with a short 50-pound fluorocarbon leader to fish mackerel. The tuna were boat-shy, so we'd have to keep the boat a good distance away from the school and long-soak the baits [let them drift back to the tuna]. That worked to an extent, but we were still losing some really big fish. Eventually we transitioned into fishing the kite and were finally able to hook these tuna on the right gear."

Looking back at the amazing year for sport fishermen off Southern California, one can't help but have high hopes. While no one, scientists included, can truly prognosticate water temperatures for 2016, it seems that anglers are justified in hoping for another crazy and exciting year.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Erik Landesfeind is an inshore-fishing specialist who lives in Long Beach, California. He splits his time between fishing saltwater (calico) bass tournaments and targeting pelagic species in his Robalo Cayman 226. Landesfeind has more than 30 years' experience in fishing the waters off Southern California and Mexico.

RICHARD HERRMANN (TOP), JIM HENDRICKS (LEFT)

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BAY BOAT

FISHERMAN
CENTER CONSOLE

SPORTSMAN
DUAL CONSOLE

COASTAL®
WALK AROUND

SCARAB®
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FLORIDA KEYS: A FISH FOR EVERY SEASON

NO MATTER THE MONTH, TOP TARGETS AWAIT ANGLERS JOURNEYING TO THE KEYS

BY SAM HUDSON

COURTESY ANDY NEWMAN / FLORIDA KEYS NEWS BUREAU

Green and blue waters envelop Islamorada, signaling sandbars, flats and channels. All of the Florida Keys are a playground for sport fish and anglers alike.

Driving south down U.S. 1 in Florida, it's easy to become hypnotized by the green and blue waters surrounding top fishing destinations such as Key Largo, Islamorada, Marathon and Key West. There are plenty of stretches along the main drive that allow car travelers to watch boaters catch tarpon or snapper. How distracting!

The Florida Keys is a coral archipelago stretching far into the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean, providing numerous launch points to some of the most diverse and productive salt waters in North America. The coral shores lead to pristine flats and coral reefs, with the reef edges acting as the final step out to deep bluewater. Anglers in flats skiffs and bay boats explore the extensive grass-and-sand flats, deep channels and bridge structures. Light-tackle boats make hay along the wrecks and reefs. Offshore center-consoles and sport-fishers roam the open waters in search of pelagics. The Keys remain a saltwater angler's paradise.

With so many target species available, timing is critical. Sure, some species are available year-round, but that's not always the case. This calendar guide, formulated from interviews with respected Keys captains, highlights a different species each month of the year.

JANUARY

REDFISH

CAPT. RICK STANCZYK, ISLAMORADA

Keys redfish cooperate all year long, allowing captains such as Islamorada's Rick Stanczyk to take advantage during the cool months. Stanczyk runs a 22-foot SeaCraft bay boat and shies away from super-shallow fishing for reds, so his top months are the cooler ones, from December to February. He favors the creeks near the Northwest Cape on Florida's mainland, casting medium-light Shimano spinning outfits spooled with 20-pound braid, 30-pound leader and natural baits.

"During these months, redfish tend to push out of the very shallow flats into the channel runoffs, island moats and creeks of the mainland Everglades," he says. "The areas may be anywhere from 2 to 10 feet deep. In many instances, we catch them over hard, rocky bottom."

During a cold front with a hard north wind, reds school up heavily in areas like these channels. On a high, rising tide, redfish move out of the holes and find similar structure along the shorelines.

"My favorite technique is probably pitching live shrimp or pilchards around the shorelines, islands, and in the creeks of the mainland," Stanczyk says. "You have a shot at catching redfish, snook or even little tarpon while doing this. You can also chum areas that look productive and attract fish away from structure."

FEBRUARY

KING MACKEREL

CAPT. TONY MURPHY, KEY WEST

Capt. Tony Murphy heads to the Gulf of Mexico's green waters late in the year to target 30-plus-pound king mackerel. From December to February, look for water temperatures from 72 to 76 degrees along reef edges to find the kings.

"The break in 45 to 52 feet of Gulf water is great in February," he says. "In the Atlantic, we fish the inside reef edge from 75 to 120 feet. A west tide is optimal, especially with the predominantly east wind."

Murphy's favorite tactic is chumming the kings into a feeding frenzy with live pilchards, then casting a fly rod for the mackerel. But on a normal charter, he uses Shimano Terez rods and Saragosa spinners loaded with 50-pound braid.

"For a leader, I'll use two rodlengths of 30-pound

South Florida produces hefty redfish. Target them in the channels in winter and flats throughout summer.

Two popular options near Key West: targeting permit on the grass flats of the Content Keys (top) and live-baiting king mackerel in 50-foot Gulf waters (above).

ADRIAN E. GRAY (TOP, OPPOSITE), PAT FORD

fluorocarbon connected to 12 inches of No. 5 wire with an Albright knot," Murphy adds. "The hook size will depend on the type and size of live bait."

MARCH

PERMIT

CAPT. LENNY LEONARD, KEY WEST

Before permit head to deeper waters in April to spawn, Capt. Lenny Leonard targets them on the shallow flats of the Lower Keys. From the Gulf's Content Keys west to the Marquesas, permit fishing is available most months of the year, with February and March attracting the largest fish to the flats. Look for flats with hard bottom and plenty of current — chances are permit will be feeding or staging nearby. When fishing the flats, watch for the flash of the fish's sides reflecting direct sunlight.

"I believe those fish are pre-feeding at this time," says Leonard. "They head shallow to eat and warm up their bellies — almost an incubation period for the eggs."

Leonard sight-fishes shallow flats in less than 3 feet of water, preferring fly tackle, though he guides both fly and spin anglers regularly. "Using a live crab seems to work best, but permit will definitely eat a live shrimp presented properly on a diamond bucktail jig," he says.

On fly, Leonard prefers an 8- to 10-weight setup with a floating line. "Since most of the crab-imitator fly patterns have dumbbell eyes, there's no need to use a sinking fly line if the fly sinks," he says.

APRIL

INSHORE SHARKS

CAPT. NATE WHEELER, SUMMERLAND KEY

With blacktip, spinner, bull and hammerhead sharks readily available from February to April, guides such as Capt. Nate Wheeler target the different species for their sporting qualities.

Oversize sharks like this lemon roam the shallows, offering spectacular light-tackle fishing in the spring months.

> **"I REALLY PREFER TO FISH FOR SHARKS ON THE EDGES OF CHANNEL FLATS IN SHALLOW WATER, SO YOU CAN WATCH THEM TRACK AND EAT YOUR BAIT.**

When casting a live crab for permit, don't be surprised if an oversize bonnethead shark finds it first — the mini hammerheads go nuts for sand-dollar-size crustaceans.

"Fun blacktips and spinners trail schools of baitfish such as mullet and ladyfish that invade the Keys in the winter months," says Wheeler. "As soon as the tarpon start pushing through in March and April, many 'capital' sharks like bulls and hammerheads follow them in."

The large channels running between Keys flats and islands, measuring anywhere from 5 to 25 feet deep, provide plenty of food and good habitat for sharks. "I really prefer to fish for sharks on the edges of channel flats in shallow water, so you can watch them track and eat your bait," says Wheeler.

Wheeler prefers to use light-tackle spinning gear, 25 pounds or less, for maximum sport when fishing the flats near Big Pine and Sugarloaf keys. Much larger conventional tackle is necessary for the bigger sharks, he says.

MAY

MUTTON SNAPPER

CAPT. MIKE WEINHOFER, KEY WEST

From December to June, delicious and hard-fighting bottom species like red grouper and mutton snapper are available to anglers. (Be mindful of the seasons: In 2016, Florida's Atlantic state waters are closed to red grouper from January 1 to April 30.)

The full-moon spawn in May attracts masses of muttons, followed in June by their movement into shallow water.

The Dry Tortugas is famous for its mongo mutton snapper, especially during May's full moon.

BRIAN GROSSENBACHER (BOTTOM RIGHT), JASON ARNOLD / JASONARNOLDPHOTO.COM (OPPOSITE TOP), ADRIAN E. GRAY (2)

In the Gulf, a falling tide is best, says Capt. Mike Weinhofer, of Compass Rose Charters. Productive structures are the ledges or small rock outcroppings over flat-bottom areas. Key West has the Bar, which is 45 feet deep on top, but drops to 110 feet over just 50 yards.

"My favorite place to catch muttons is down to the west [near the Dry Tortugas], in less than 20 feet of water, using live ballyhoo on spinning rods with some backbone," he says. "I use Fin-Nor spinners with 30-pound Sufix 832 braid, tipped with 30- to 40-pound fluoro leader tied to a small white bucktail.

"The mutton and grouper fishing tend to get better the farther west you go," says Weinhofer, who adds that one fishery few anglers know about is the many true American red snapper off Key West. "The numbers of red snapper are staggering — a totally underutilized fishery that's catch-and-release for all but a few days a year," he says.

"I love fishing around the Dry Tortugas for bottom species. It's an untouched wonderland."

JUNE

TARPON

CAPT. TRAVIS HOLEMAN, KEY WEST

Key West is one of the few locales in the world that attract tarpon all year long. "I like to joke that they're here in between cold fronts, so late February and early March can be iffy," says Capt. Travis Holeman, of Key West Angling. "The top three months are definitely April, May and June." The peak migration happens with big pushes starting at 79-degree water temps.

Channels are like highways for tarpon. "A new moon [can be] a Super Bowl for our tarpon fishing," he says. "Tarpon can be found in channels, flats, and on the beach, all moving somewhere."

Holeman sight-casts Hogy HDUV baits paired with Barbarian jig heads. He uses a Shimano TranX with 80-pound braid and a 6-foot-6-inch Trevala jigging rod. He mostly fishes out of Hurricane Hole Marina in Key West, but travels to different Keys launch points if the fish are on the move.

"Once you figure out what the tarpon want for a retrieve, the bite rates are insane," he says. "To me, it's all about the near-surface feed. I want big explosions and smiles all around. This method is active, with plenty of casting."

JULY

DOLPHIN

CAPT. BRIAN CONE, ISLAMORADA

Dolphin fishing is all about the birds during the summer months. "The large numbers of birds around during that time of the year really help us find feeding dolphin," says Capt. Brian Cone, of Contagious Charters in Islamorada. He uses 12- to 20-pound spinning gear, depending on the size of dolphin he encounters.

The Gulf Stream delivers large amounts of baitfish to the area in May, June and July, attracting predators

Dolphin are a blast during the summer months. Spot the birds, and mahi won't be far behind. The two predators often jockey for schooled-up baitfish.

June is a top tarpon month in the Florida Keys. Expect high numbers of fish in 79-degree water temperatures.

such as dolphin, tuna, wahoo and sailfish. "The current runs over broken bottom and humps to form reliable rips off Islamorada," he says. "The agitated water is a prime area for dolphin to feed."

Cone heads out to the rips, always on the lookout for surface-feeding mahi. Spotting the birds is a dead giveaway, often signaling bait schools and game fish nearby. "Dolphin are always in a feeding mode, and I love the challenge of hunting them down," he says.

AUGUST

BLACKFIN TUNA

CAPT. JAMES CHAPPELL, ISLAMORADA

The fall months offshore of the Middle and Upper Keys offer exceptional blackfin tuna fishing, says Capt. James Chappell, of Catchalottafish Charters. "From August to the first half of November, fish are consistent and solid-size 10-plus-pounders," he says. "We get a push in the spring, but it's unreliable with all the sharks."

The best structures offshore are the massive humps that protrude from the ocean floor. "Marathon Hump, 409 Hump and Islamorada Hump are the best," says Chappell. "I live-chum blackfin with pilchards. I like any sort of visual fishing, and chumming also allows for different techniques such as catching tuna on a fly rod."

When live-chumming, Chappell uses 20- to 30-pound spinning tackle connected to 15 feet of 25-pound fluorocarbon leader, terminating with a 2/0 Mustad or Owner Mutu circle hook.

In the winter, blackfin move in toward the reef to feed on the baits that move with the fronts, says Chappell. "It's a blast to get covered up on the kites by 20-plus-pounders!"

Live-chumming blackfin tuna at the Marathon Hump allows anglers to cast flies to the marauding surface feeders.

Keys bonefish grow large, offering anglers beefy targets. Catch them in September near Islamorada.

SEPTEMBER

BONEFISH

CAPT. TED BENBOW, ISLAMORADA

For the best opportunity to catch numerous bonefish on Islamorada's flats, Capt. Ted Benbow and his son, Capt. Donnie, fish the top of the incoming tide and the start of the falling tide. Benbow prefers spinning gear rigged with 10-pound braid, or 10-weight fly rods paired with small crab patterns.

"Bonefishing is all about the food source and moving water," says Benbow. "It's great to see bones tailing in super-shallow water. But in two feet of water, when they're schooling and producing mud poofs, you know they're in a feeding mood."

Fooling a single bonefish into striking is much harder than casting to a school of bonefish competing with one another. Still, the Benbows love spending their days sight-casting a fly to spooky bonefish.

"We frequently practice throwing the fly rod with the left and right hand," says Benbow. "This way, there is no need to backcast; we just switch hands when needed. We make it into a game, trying to catch one with each hand on the same trip."

OCTOBER

SWORDFISH

CAPT. NICK STANCZYK, ISLAMORADA

The continental shelf is a highway for swordfish off the coast of Islamorada, says Capt. Nick Stanczyk. Every month of the year, broadbill swordfish are available to target in waters from 1,400 to 1,900 feet.

"I prefer to fish during the day when the weather's nice, especially in May, October and November," he says. "I believe that's when a lot of fish migrate through. Any sort of bottom structure like hills, holes, mounds and walls that hold bait can be productive."

The Gulf Stream averages 2 to 3 knots off Islamorada, manageable even when fishing deep. Stanczyk prefers Shimano Tiagras, Tyrnos and Talicas with 65- to 80-pound braided main line and 200-pound mono wind-on leader. He pairs his Shimanos with custom swordfish rods from Key Largo Rods. For anglers who don't want to hand-crank, he uses electric-assist reels such as the Shimano Beastmaster 9000 with

The Keys produces swordfish so consistently, anglers can target the deepwater species during daylight hours.

65-pound braid.

"When the rod tip bounces, you don't know if it's a 40- or 400-pounder," says Stanczyk. "It's a guessing game until you see the fish. You never know when you're going to hook a giant."

NOVEMBER

SAILFISH

CAPT. ROSS EARLY, ISLAMORADA

The waters off Tavernier and Indian keys are prime sailfish grounds for Capt. Ross Early of Islamorada.

"I'm looking for royal-blue water color," he says, "or any kind of color change to indicate a current rip, where two different bodies of water come together. This is where the sailfish like to hang out."

Early's most productive months are November, December and January because of the good numbers of ballyhoo on the reef. He prefers the 120-foot depths coupled with a hard northeast current. For tackle, Early uses Daiwa BG60 spooled with 15-pound main line, doubled up with a Bimini twist to 30-pound fluorocarbon leader and a 4/0 Mustad live-bait hook.

"My personal favorite technique is to sight-fish for sailfish in the shallows, less than 30 feet of water," Early says. "On sunny days, you can find the sailfish when you're riding high in the tower. After spotting them, fire up the bite by chumming live pilchards first, then sending out a hooked bait."

DECEMBER

WAHOO

CAPT. R.T. TROSSET, KEY WEST

Fishing the edge of the Bar off Key West, on the outside reef, Capt. R.T. Trosset targets wahoo with live speedos, bullet bonito or blue runners. Anywhere there is an irregularity in the reef, such as a high or low spot, it's liable to attract wahoo. The best fishing conditions are during an east current or when the Gulf Stream edge moves in close to the reef, he says.

"The top fishing times are five days before the full moon and five days after in December and January," says Trosset. "Also, mid-June to July can be hot, especially under flotsam in 200 to 2,000 feet."

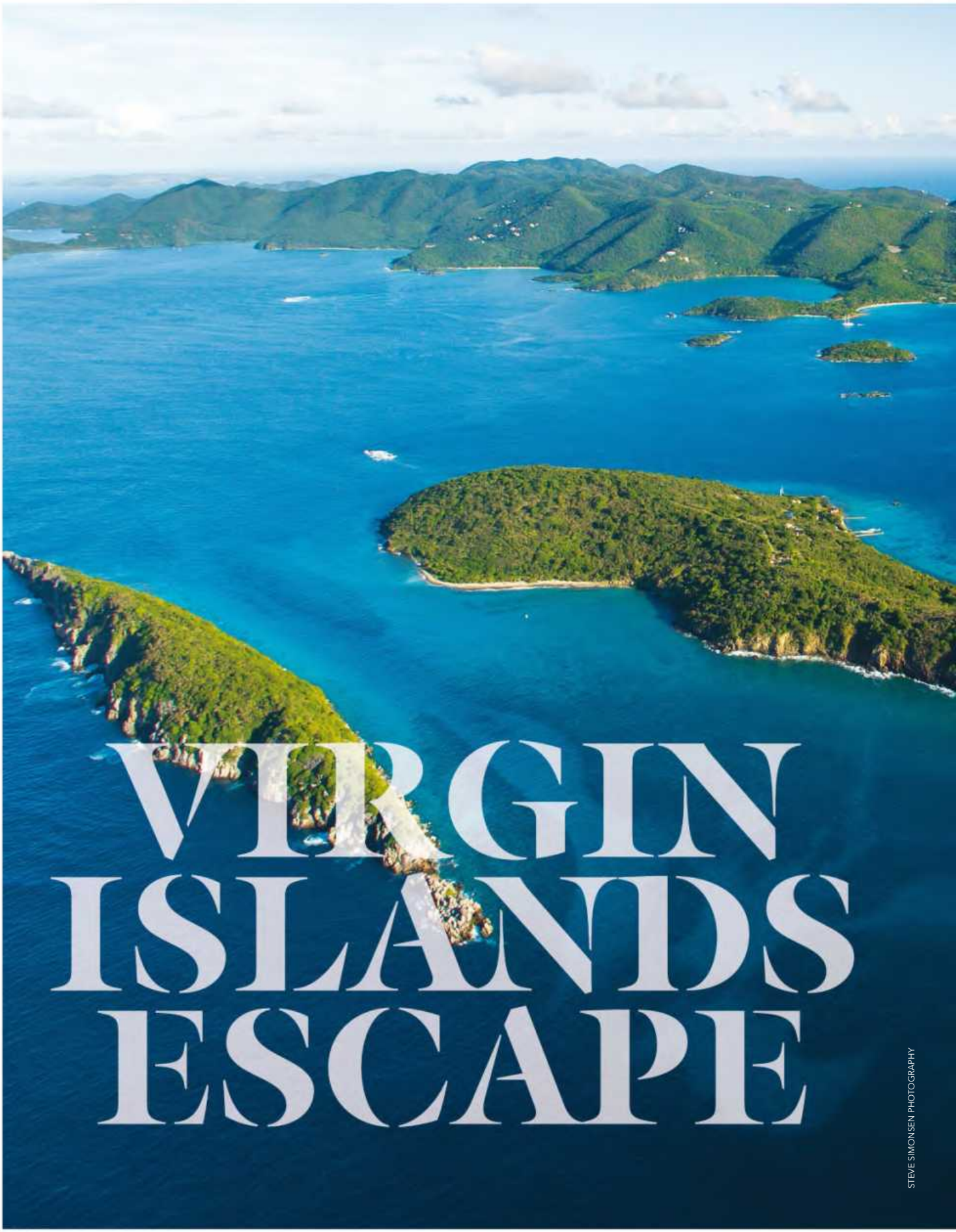
Once you hook one, keep fishing hard: Wahoo often school together, and you catch more. "I like fishing with live baits for the spectacular, skyrocketing bites," he says. "I've caught more than 20 in a day, averaging 25 to 60 pounds."

Around flotsam, Trosset trolls deep-diving purple-and-black bombers, or he'll jig metal or bucktails 200 to 300 feet below the object. For live-baiting, chunking or jigging, Trosset prefers to use Fin-Nor 6500 spinners with 30-pound braid. For conventional setups, he opts for a Fin-Nor Marquesa 30 on a Tidal rod with 50-pound braid.

Dark blue water, current rips and color changes concentrate sailfish in the winter months, when ballyhoo are prevalent on local reefs.

Target wahoo in the early mornings off Key West outer reefs. The top days occur before and after the full moon of December, says Capt. R.T. Trosset.

PAT FORD (THIS PAGE TOP, OPPOSITE LEFT), JASON ARNOLD / JASONARNOLDPHOTO.COM (OPPOSITE TOP), ADRIAN E. GRAY (2)



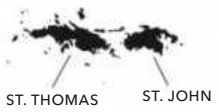
VIRGIN ISLANDS ESCAPE

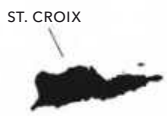
STEVE SIMONSEN PHOTOGRAPHY

LIVE-CHUM FOR WINTER WAHOO AND MAHI OFF ST. THOMAS AND ST. JOHN

BY TOM RICHARDSON

U.S. VIRGIN ISLANDS





Of the three landmasses comprising the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Thomas and St. John lie within close proximity to each other, while St. Croix remains almost 50 miles south. The United States bought the islands from Denmark in 1917.

AS OUR 35-FOOT CENTER-CONSOLE RODE THE BIG CARIBBEAN SWELLS, I COULDN'T BELIEVE I HAD ACTUALLY PULLED OFF MY ESCAPE FROM THE SNOWIEST WINTER EVER RECORDED IN NEW ENGLAND. JUST TWO DAYS EARLIER, ON FEBRUARY 15, I HAD BEEN GAZING AT THE BARREN, WIND-BLASTED TUNDRA PURPORTED TO BE BOSTON'S LOGAN AIRPORT, WHERE THE TEMPERATURE WAS SO COLD IT HAD CAUSED THE TOW BAR OF OUR PLANE'S PUSHBACK TRACTOR TO SNAP LIKE A STRAND OF UNCOOKED SPAGHETTI. AS THE CREW WAITED FOR A REPLACEMENT TRACTOR TO ARRIVE, AN ENTIRE JETLOAD OF DEJECTED PASSENGERS WAS THINKING THE SAME THING: WE SHALL NEVER LEAVE THIS CURSED LAND!

Yet here I was, with friend Jonathan Craig, heading toward bluewater adventure off St. Thomas and St. John in the U.S. Virgin Islands. The six- to eight-foot seas heaving beneath the hull were a parting shot from the big storms that had pummeled my home coast nearly every week since mid-January, but we didn't mind. For once, it wasn't snowing.

"This has been a particularly rough winter for us too," acknowledged Capt. Jonathan Gatcliffe, who, along with mates Tyler Maltby and Glenn Charlett of Double Header Sportfishing, had picked us up in St. John's Cruz Bay. Like ripples expanding in a pond, swells generated by winter nor'easters in New England often extend to the Caribbean, creating heavy surf along the islands' north-facing shores and stirring up the inshore waters. Fortunately for Virgin Islands fishermen and visiting anglers, there are plenty of options, especially if you have a big center-console at your disposal.

PILCHARD POWER

Despite the heavy seas, our destination was the legendary North Drop, offshore grounds made famous by big-game pioneer Johnny Harms in the 1960s. Fishing out of St. Thomas, Harms discovered that this abrupt curve in the continental shelf 20 miles north of the island, where the depth plunges from 200 to more than 2,000 feet in less than a quarter-mile, produced immense upwellings that attracted baitfish and large predators. Happily, it still does.

Unlike the traditional method of trolling for offshore species, the *Double Header* crew prefers live-chumming, a technique Gatcliffe imported from his home island of Trinidad. Gathering the 500 pilchards needed before each trip is a lot more work than dragging lures, but it usually pays quick dividends, as we discovered immediately upon pulling up to a lobster-pot buoy that had been set near the edge of the shelf drop-off.

The buoy was adorned with several long stalks of bamboo, and Gatcliffe explained that the local lobstermen often use these homemade fish-aggregating devices (FADs) to bag a few bonus "market fish" while hauling their traps.

FABULOUS FADS

As Gatcliffe set up a drift past the bamboo FAD, Maltby scooped a half-dozen pilchards from the transom livewell and scattered them over the surrounding water to sound the dinner bell. Meanwhile Charlett cast out a pair of free-lined baits within 20 feet of the FAD, on medium spinning outfits spooled with 20-pound-test mono. Seconds later, line was peeling off one of the reels and Craig was fighting our first fish of the day.

One of the many benefits of live-chumming is that it allows for the use of relatively light gear, and Craig had his hands full with what turned out to be a 30-pound wahoo. The standard gear employed by the *Double Header* crew when targeting both wahoo and mahimahi consists of Offshore Angler Frigate spinning reels and 7-foot Ocean Master rods rated for 20-pound line. The reels are loaded with 50-pound-test braid backing, followed by a top shot of 20-pound-test mono. When toothy wahoo arrive, the crew adds 2 feet of 40-pound-test single-strand wire ahead of a 6/0 Owner circle hook. The wire is connected to the mono via a small barrel swivel.

Above: While many USVI captains choose to troll, live-chumming with pilchards can be more productive. Right: A buoy marks this homemade fish-attracting device made with bamboo.

TOM RICHARDSON (2), PAT FORD (OPPOSITE)

Wahoo are a headliner species in the Virgin Islands during winter and early spring. Most weigh 30 to 50 pounds, although fish up to 100 pounds can be found. (Gatcliffe's personal best is a 110-pounder.) Prime time is November and December, but good numbers of fish hang around through March. Indeed, Gatcliffe and Maltby have even caught them over the nearshore reefs in depths of 100 to 150 feet when bluewater pushes in close to the islands.

If live bait proves scarce or the FADs aren't holding fish, Gatcliffe and Maltby often troll for wahoo using high-speed jet heads, Halco Tremblers, and deep lures fished behind Z-Wings around weed lines, rips and birds. The technique can be effective; however, nothing beats the excitement of using live chum.

MAHI MAYHEM

With a fine 'hoo on ice, we picked up and ran to another pot buoy. This time we uncovered a pack of aggressive mahi that ambushed our pilchards

School-size mahi can be found year-round off the USVI's North and South drops, and around nearshore reefs. Larger fish – to 60 pounds – arrive in May and June.

USVI SPECIES AVAILABILITY

SPECIES	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Blue marlin												
Dolphin (mahi)												
Snapper (mutton, yellowtail, mangrove)												
Tarpon												
Tuna (South Drop)												
Tuna (North Drop)												
Wahoo												

= excellent; = good; = fair; blank = poor or not available

When live bait proves scarce and the FADs don't produce, USVI captains troll for wahoo. Prime wahoo time starts in late fall and runs through winter. The fish average 30 to 50 pounds but can top out over 100.

almost before they hit the water. For several minutes, pandemonium erupted as the frenetic fish crashed baits, leaped around the boat, and flopped about the deck. When the dust settled, we had landed about a dozen fish from 8 to 15 pounds, some of which were herded into the fish box and invited to dinner that evening.

Live-chumming for mahi is fast-paced, high-drama fishing and allows the angler to cast artificials. Topwaters, epoxy jigs, metal spoons and a variety of flashy flies all work once the fish have been whipped into a frenzy by the live bait. Like mahi pretty much everywhere, these fish become hard to catch once a few are pulled from the school, so when the action dies, it's best to try another spot.

Mahi are year-round residents of the islands. They can be found along both the North Drop and the less famous (but no less productive) South Drop — the steep shelf edge 10 miles south of St. John — throughout the winter, as well as over the nearshore reefs at times. However, the biggest fish, up to 60 pounds, are typically caught in May and June.

THOSE SUMMER BLUES

Spring also happens to mark the start of marlin season. Blues begin to show along the South Drop in April, whereas the prime bite along the North Drop takes place from June through September, with the week after the August full moon being most productive. Of course, a few marlin are always present offshore, and sometimes make unexpected appearances during winter and spring trips.

Following our initial flurry of action with the mahi, we leapfrogged from buoy to buoy for the next hour, bailing fish at nearly every stop.

ADRIAN E. GRAY (TOP), TOM RICHARDSON (2)

> **WAHOO ARE A HEADLINER SPECIES IN THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DURING WINTER AND EARLY SPRING. MOST WEIGH 30 TO 50 POUNDS, ALTHOUGH FISH UP TO 100 POUNDS CAN BE FOUND.**

If the mahi failed to show right away, Maltby would send down a live bait on a downrigger set at 50 feet and slow-troll it around the buoy.

This technique is also a great way to target yellowfin and blackfin tuna around the buoys, although the downrigger bait is usually set a bit deeper for the tuna. Maltby explained that both species are taken throughout the year, although their presence is somewhat unpredictable. "November 2014 was incredible, simply off the charts," he said. "However, April and May were the hot months in 2013. You just never know with tuna."

Since the tuna are bigger and stronger than mahi, the *Double Header* crew targets them using live pilchards fished on 50-pound stand-up gear. They pair 5-foot-9-inch Connley short-butt rods with Shimano TLD and Tiagra 50 reels, backed with 80-pound braid and topped with 60- to 80-pound mono. The rigs are finished with 6 feet of 60- to 80-pound fluorocarbon leader and a 9/0 Mustad circle hook.

While the yellowfin, which average 40 pounds, could be taken on lighter tackle, the heavier gear allows anglers to horse the fish to the boat before sharks can home in on them.

ISLAND GUIDE

The U.S. Virgin Islands include three islands: St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix. The former two represent a separate fishery from that off St. Croix; they're 50 miles away and closer to the productive waters of the North and South drops that mark the edge of the continental shelf.

Visiting anglers fly into St. Thomas and can stay either on St. Thomas or on neighboring St. John, just 3 miles east and accessible by ferry ($14 round-trip) from either Charlotte Amalie or Red Hook harbors, where the majority of charter boats are based.

Double Header Sportfishing is based in Red Hook, on the east end of St. Thomas, but will readily pick up charters in Cruz Bay on nearby St. John. Captains Jonathan Gatcliffe and Tyler Maltby maintain a pair of 35-foot center-consoles and a 42-foot sport-fisherman that allow them to target nearshore and offshore species.

They run half-day, three-quarter-day and full-day trips for everything from blue marlin and tuna to kingfish and snapper, and can fish both the North and South drops. Rates range from $600 for a half-day trip aboard a 35-foot center-console to $1,400 for a 10-hour marlin trip aboard a 40-foot sport-fisher. Guests may request up to 20 pounds of fish to keep per charter (30 pounds on a full day), which the captain will fillet. The remainder of the fish stays with the boat. Contact Double Header Charters for more information at 340-777-7317 (doubleheadersportfishing.net).

Accommodations on St. Thomas and St. John include everything from luxury resorts to campgrounds. A variety of rental villas – ranging widely in price from about $1,500 to $6,000 per week – are also available through Caribbean Villas (caribbeanvillas.com). Hotel options on St. John include the Westin (866-716-8108; westinresortstjohn.com) and the Caneel Bay Resort (340-776-6111; caneelbay.com). On St. Thomas, try Marriott's Frenchman's Cove, Secret Harbour Beach Resort and the Ritz-Carlton.

Travel to the Virgin Islands from the East Coast is remarkably easy. Jet Blue offers direct flights to St. Thomas from Boston, and American, Delta and United also fly to St. Thomas via a variety of connecting cities. For more USVI information, visit vinow.com.

Above: A Caribbean beach in winter thaws out even the coldest visitors. Below: A live pilchard on the bottom inside the drop-off tempted this mutton snapper. Nearby reefs also hold grouper.

And speaking of sharks, some big ones patrol the North and South drops, including tigers, bulls, hammerheads and duskies. They pose a perennial problem for tuna and marlin fishermen.

NEARSHORE SMORGASBORD

Aside from billfish, tuna, wahoo and mahi, there are many other species to tangle with, as Maltby proved when we stopped to fish another pot buoy just inside the drop-off in 200 feet of water. Shortly after lowering a live pilchard to the bottom on a three-way rig, he was slugging it out with what turned out to be a 20-pound mutton snapper. "We often send a live pilchard to the bottom when live-chumming along the shelf edge," he explained. "That way we catch snapper and grouper too."

Muttons, along with big yellowtail and a variety of other species, can also be taken over the nearshore coral reefs, or "humps," in 100 to 150 feet of water. These reefs can be found within 10 miles of the main islands, and offer a great option for a half-day trip with kids or when the offshore waters are too rough. The run time is much shorter, and it's possible to seek shelter in the lee of one of the surrounding smaller islands.

Besides snapper, the reefs usually yield fast action on rainbow runners, blackfin tuna, king mackerel, several species of jacks, sharks, barracuda, and even the occasional sailfish and mahi.

Speaking of nearshore options, Gatcliffe and Maltby introduced Craig and me to one more species to round out our already action-packed half-day trip. As we pulled into a greasy-calm Cruz Bay Harbor at dusk, Gatcliffe stopped the boat and threw out two handfuls of live pilchards. The baits immediately scattered, but not before several disappeared in bathtub-size boils.

We learned that the harbor hosts a resident population of tarpon, and we quickly connected with a 60-pound-class fish after deploying a hook bait. As darkness enveloped the harbor, Craig fought the tarpon, which made several leaps before coming unbuttoned a few feet from the boat.

Tarpon are regarded largely as a "bonus" species off St. Thomas and St. John throughout most of the year, although the islands do experience a solid run of fish along the nearshore reefs in June. This is when some local charter boats make dedicated trips for tarpon.

Even though our tarpon had escaped, we didn't mind. After all, our afternoon of fishing had yielded plenty of excitement, a cooler of fresh fillets to grill at our rental villa, and more important, a boatload of Caribbean memories to see us through the rest of the winter. Turns out we would need them!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:
Tom Richardson is a lifelong angler and former managing editor of Salt Water Sportsman*, as well as the editor of* New England Boating *magazine and co-host of* New England Boating TV.

TOM RICHARDSON (2)

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DEEP SECRETS

FOUR CAPTAINS SHARE EFFECTIVE LIVE-BAIT TECHNIQUES FOR FISHING DEEP STRUCTURE

BY JIM HENDRICKS

WALT STEARNS

Interested in catching monsters like this? Four experts reveal secrets for enticing big grouper and snapper to bite live baits.

CAPT. BILLY HARBAUGH BRIDLED A PORKFISH WITH A 5/0 CIRCLE HOOK AND BEGAN PAYING OUT A 50-FOOT LEADER AND MAIN LINE WEIGHTED BY A 16-OUNCE SINKER. "WE'RE ONLY FISHING ONE LINE HERE," HARBAUGH EXPLAINED TO CO-CAPTAIN BILL GILBERT AND ME AS HE SLOWLY DROPPED THE BAIT. "THIS IS A LIVE-BOTTOM AREA IN 150 FEET OF WATER, AND THERE ARE LOTS OF MUTTON SNAPPER HERE, BUT IF YOU DON'T FISH IT CORRECTLY, YOU WON'T CATCH A THING."

Within a few minutes, it was clear that Harbaugh was fishing it correctly. As the bait drifted over the bottom, the rod suddenly doubled over and line spilled off the reel. Gilbert wound solidly into the fish. As he battled to raise his quarry, the fish pinned him to the rail. Then I glimpsed a flash in the depths, and moments later we welcomed aboard a 14-pound mutton snapper. We returned to the marina in Islamorada, Florida, that midsummer day with three big, beautiful muttons in the cooler. Without Harbaugh's live-bait savvy, it would have never happened. When targeting trophy-size fish on deep structure, live-bait fishing becomes an art form. It requires a special understanding of wrecks, reefs and live-bottom areas; of how to deal with strong currents and fast drifts in deep water; and of which live baits and rigs are most effective for prized species such as black grouper, gag grouper, mutton snapper, red snapper and scamp. To learn these deep secrets, I talked with captains who regularly fish structure with live bait in depths of 100 to 500 feet off Georgia, South Carolina, Florida's east coast, the Florida Keys and Louisiana.

Successfully fishing live bait on deep structure requires experience, the right tackle and rigging, and strong boat-handling skills.

CAPT. JUDY HELMEY, MISS JUDY CHARTERS

Savannah, Georgia
912-897-4921
missjudycharters.com

Capt. Judy Helmey has been a licensed charter skipper since the age of 18, and has spent much of her 46-year career fishing live bait on wrecks and reef areas off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina. Her favorite species include gag grouper and scamp, which she pursues today from her custom-built charter boat, *Miss Judy Too*.

Structure in depths from 100 to 150 feet gets very little pressure here, Helmey says, largely because of the distance from shore. "The 100-foot spots are about 30 miles off the coast, and the 150-foot spots are 55 to 60 miles out," she explains.

That kind of run deters all but the most ardent boating anglers, and even then, you must keep an eye on the weather. The other good news is that these deep Atlantic Ocean wrecks and structure spots can produce year-round. Seasonal closures on grouper, however, can essentially shut down bottomfishing. In recent years, grouper fishing has been closed January 1 to May 1. For the latest seasonal closures, visit ***safmc.net***.

TECHNIQUE

Catching live bait is critical to success, so Helmey sometimes spends the better part of the morning jigging for bait with sabiki rigs. Once she feels she has adequately filled the wells, she heads out to fish the deep wrecks.

"I drift-fish mostly, and a Carolina rig works best for drifting," says Helmey, who has caught gag grouper to 60 pounds and scamp to 30 pounds on the deep wrecks off Georgia and South Carolina.

"Pick a hook between 12/0 and 14/0 that does not overpower the bait," she explains. Circle hooks are legally mandated. One of the best ways to hook the bait is through both lips, which keeps the bait from spinning as you drop it.

Use enough weight to keep the line vertical in the current, she advises. You also want to drop down fast enough — about one yard every second — to keep amberjack from eating the bait, but slowly enough to prevent the long leader from twisting and tangling.

Fish with the reel in free-spool, and let the sinker bounce on the bottom every 15 to 30 seconds to make sure you're on it, especially when fishing on the sand next to the wreck, Helmey suggests. "You have to keep the bait

ILLUSTRATION: KEVIN HAND; PHOTOS: JIM HENDRICKS (LEFT), COURTESY JUDY HELMEY (2)

Capt. Judy Helmey successfully targets big gag grouper and scamp (left) from her charter boat, *Miss Judy Too* (below), on wrecks and reefy areas in 100- to 150-foot depths off Georgia and South Carolina.

near the bottom to catch the gags and scamps," she points out. Once bit, put as much pressure on the fish as possible. "Otherwise, the groupers will get you in the wreck," she says.

If that happens, use the guitar trick: Twang on the tight line to coax the fish out. "If it moves, pull like crazy to get it out of the wreck," she says.

REGION:
Atlantic waters off Georgia and South Carolina

TARGET SPECIES:
Gag grouper, scamp

DEPTH RANGE:
100 to 150 feet

ROD:
Penn Mariner 6-foot stand-up rated for 30- to 80-pound-test

REEL:
Penn 4/0 Senator

MAIN LINE:
80-pound-test monofilament

FAVORITE LIVE BAITS:
Sand perch, cigar minnows, Spanish sardines

TERMINAL RIG:
Carolina rig with a 20- to 25-foot leader of 80- to 100-pound-test monofilament

HOOK SIZE/STYLE:
12/0 to 14/0 non-offset circle hooks

SINKER SIZE/STYLE:
Egg sinkers up to 8 ounces

CAPT. JUDY HELMEY'S LIVE-BAIT RIG FOR GAG GROUPER AND SCAMP

When targeting large black grouper on deep wrecks, Capt. Jimbo Thomas likes to use the biggest live bait possible.

CAPT. JIMBO THOMAS, THOMAS FLYER CHARTERS

Miami, Florida
305-374-4133
thomasflyerfishing.com

With 35 years of South Florida sport fishing experience, Capt. Jimbo Thomas loves to fish wrecks as deep as 500 feet from his 42-foot Post, *Thomas Flyer*, though the bulk of his fishing focuses on the 200- to 300-foot depth range.

"When you're fishing that deep, you have no competition from divers," says Thomas. "It also eliminates most of the weekend warriors." As a result, most deep wrecks don't experience an extraordinary amount of fishing pressure.

Fishing live bait at such depths requires specialized skills and tackle, however, particularly when pursuing one of Thomas' favorite targets, big black grouper. Some of the biggest challenges include dealing with strong currents and avoiding fish like amberjack that grab the bait before it gets to the bottom. If you can overcome these, you can catch black grouper up to 50 pounds.

Thomas particularly likes wrecks located close to the 240- to 270-foot ledge that parallels the east coast of South Florida a few miles offshore. "The ledge is like a highway for fish," he explains. "So more groupers and other fish are likely to stop at nearby wrecks to feed than in other areas."

The best fishing for big black grouper is from the end of October through May, though the season has traditionally been closed from January 1 to May 1. For the latest regulations for Florida waters, visit ***myfwc.com***; for federal waters, visit ***safmc.net***.

REGION:
Atlantic waters off Miami

TARGET SPECIES:
Black grouper

DEPTH RANGE:
200 to 500 feet

ROD:
6-foot stand-up rated for 50-pound-test

REEL:
Daiwa Sealine Tournament 50

MAIN LINE:
50-pound-test monofilament

FAVORITE LIVE BAITS:
Pinfish, blue runners, goggle-eyes, grunts, bonito and speedos (redtail scad)

TERMINAL RIG:
Three-way rig with a 30-foot leader for the hook (connected to the three-way swivel with a snap swivel) and an 18-inch leader for the sinker, both 80- to 100-pound-test fluorocarbon

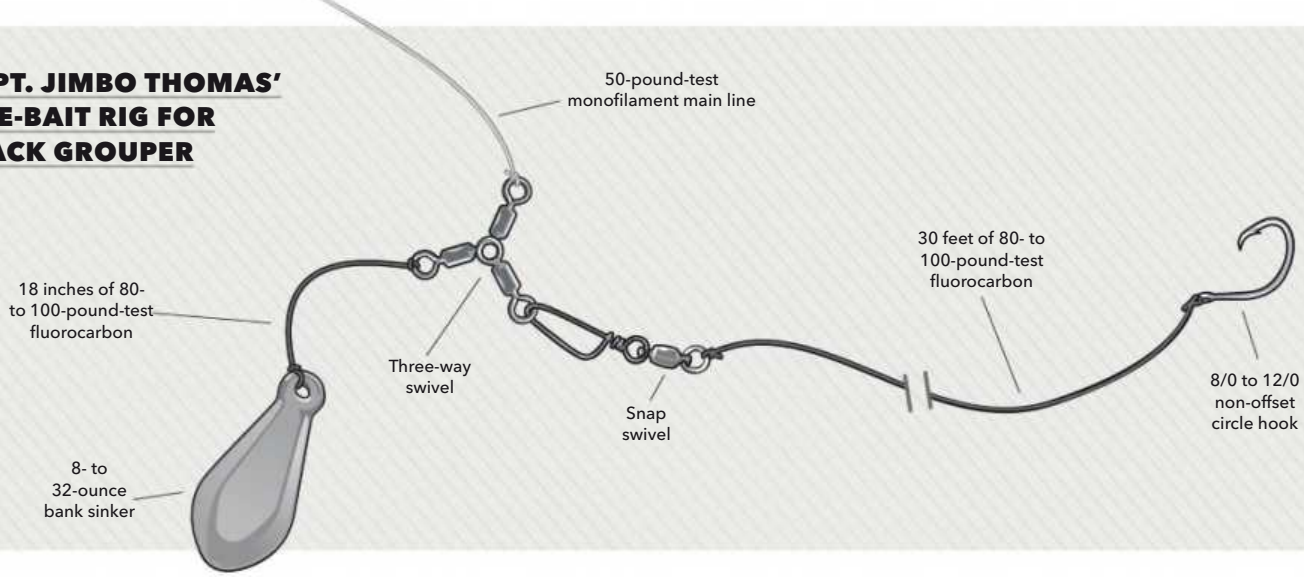
HOOK SIZE/STYLE:
8/0 to 12/0 non-offset circle hooks

SINKER SIZE/STYLE:
Bank sinkers from 8 to 32 ounces

TECHNIQUE

Lining up the boat for a drift ranks as one of the most important elements of successfully fishing deep wrecks. "You need to take wind and current both into consideration," he says. "I'll line up anywhere from 100 feet to 300 yards up-current of the wreck, depending

CAPT. JIMBO THOMAS' LIVE-BAIT RIG FOR BLACK GROUPER



on the drift speed and depth." A light 1-knot drift is the best you can hope for, but the captain says that most of the time, the Gulf Stream is pushing north at 3 to 4 knots. Thomas hooks his bait sideways through the nose or through the upper and lower lips. "Any other way, and the bait will spin and tangle on the way down," he explains.

Thomas pays out the live bait first (sometimes unclipping the leader from the three-way swivel to make this step easier), waiting until after the leader is streaming out behind to drop the heavy bank sinker over the side. He reattaches the leader to the three-way swivel, then drops the sinker relatively slowly to avoid tangling the leader with the main line. While amberjack can be a nuisance when targeting other species, their presence bodes well — a sign that the wreck is full of life. If you don't get bit right away, move on to another wreck.

One key to attracting the biggest grouper is to select the largest bait possible. Also, Thomas says, using long leader lets the bait swim more freely and naturally. Once the bait reaches bottom, reel up about eight to 10 cranks, then another eight to 10 cranks once you're over the wreck. On the down-current side, drop back down again.

"The more current, the more likely the groupers will be on the back side of the wreck," Thomas says. Sometimes black grouper hang out just behind the wreck or as much as 150 feet down-current of the wreck, congregating around a piece of debris. "Don't get too fixated on the wreck itself," Thomas advises.

Fish with the reel in gear (except when dropping down). "As soon as you feel a pull, start pulling your a-- off," he says.

Black grouper often hang out down-current of a deep wreck, so keep fishing even after you drift past the structure.

CAPT. BILLY HARBAUGH, CAPTAIN FOR HIRE

Islamorada, Florida
305-852-2102

Underwater cameras were an essential learning tool for Capt. Billy Harbaugh, who hires out as a captain to boat owners wanting to learn more about successful fishing techniques. "Before GoPros ever existed, we were dropping waterproof cameras to the bottom in areas off the Florida Keys where we consistently caught muttons," Harbaugh explains. He wanted to know why so many were caught there.

"What I found were wide swaths of scattered rocks, limestone beds, sea fans and brain corals stretching as far as 500 yards," he says. That doesn't exactly light up the fish finder, Harbaugh admits, so it can be difficult to get enthused. Yet he found big mutton snapper in these live-bottom areas — not in big concentrations, but one every 150 feet or so. Most of the fish hovered 4 to 5 feet off the bottom, with their nose down, eyes scanning for crabs, shrimp and baitfish.

Thanks to the camera work, everything became clear, and with improved understanding, Harbaugh's success rate also improved. Most of the fish he catches are 11 to 18 pounds; his biggest was 21½ pounds. The Florida state record is 30 pounds, 4 ounces.

The bulk of his live-bottom areas are in 130 to 140 feet, but Harbaugh also fishes spots as deep as 230 feet. Without much protective cover, these muttons can be a bit spooky. Over the years, the captain has refined his rigs and tactics for presenting live baits.

Mutton fishing can be good year-round in the Keys, but peaks in April and May and again in November and December as the water cools. Currently there are no season closures in Florida for mutton snapper, though size and bag limits apply. To learn more, visit ***myfwc.com***.

TECHNIQUE

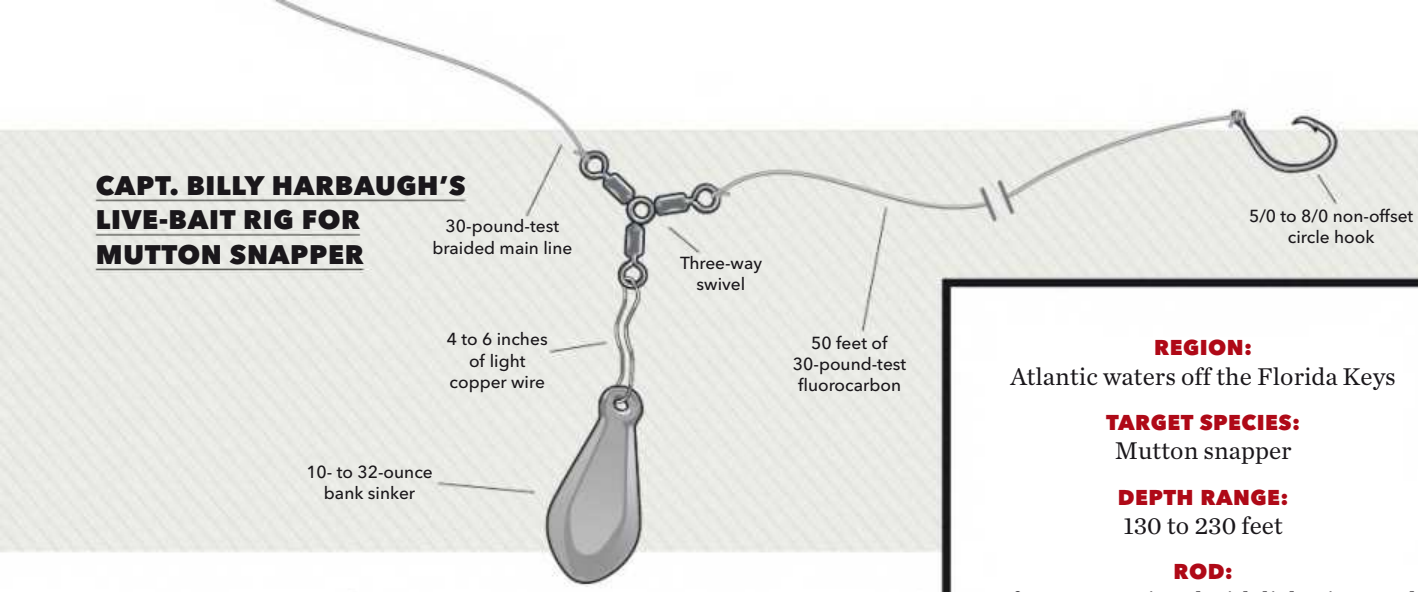
As with most deep-structure techniques, keep the line as vertical as possible while drift-fishing live-bottom areas. That's easier said than done, Harbaugh contends.

Currents — typically around 3 knots in the Atlantic off the Middle Keys — complicate things. But the stronger the current, the better

Big mutton snapper like to hunt around widely scattered rock and coral, structure spots known as live-bottom areas.

ILLUSTRATION: KEVIN HAND; PHOTOS: ADRIAN E. GRAY (TOP), WALT STEARNS (2)

CAPT. BILLY HARBAUGH'S LIVE-BAIT RIG FOR MUTTON SNAPPER



REGION:
Atlantic waters off the Florida Keys

TARGET SPECIES:
Mutton snapper

DEPTH RANGE:
130 to 230 feet

ROD:
7-foot conventional with light tip, rated for 20- to 40-pound-test

REEL:
Shimano Torium 20

MAIN LINE:
30-pound-test braid

FAVORITE LIVE BAITS:
Porkfish, pinfish, pilchards, ballyhoo, cigar minnows, speedos

TERMINAL RIG:
Three-way rig with 50 feet of 30-pound-test fluorocarbon leader for the hook and a light piece of copper wire attaching the sinker (serves as a release in case the sinker hangs up)

HOOK SIZE/STYLE:
5/0 to 8/0 non-offset circle hooks

SINKER SIZE/STYLE:
Bank sinkers from 10 to 32 ounces

the bite. The solution is to use enough weight to stay vertical, but no more than necessary.

Another rule of thumb: Drop the bait relatively slowly, allowing the leader to straighten out in the current before placing the heavy sinker in the water and gently lowering it to the bottom.

Use the boat engines to remain stationary as you deploy baits, and then from time to time back into the current a bit when the line starts scoping out too far. To help keep lines from tangling in the propellers, Harbaugh fishes only one rod at a time and usually places it in a gunwale rod holder. He moves the rod from one holder to another to keep the line clear of the engines.

In addition to catching mutton snapper on live-bottom areas, Capt. Billy Harbaugh will hook an occasional black grouper.

Harbaugh bridles the bait by passing a rubber band through the fish's nares. Combined with the extraordinarily long leader, this allows the bait to swim as naturally as possible. He likes to drift the sinker a couple of feet above the bottom so it's not banging and hanging up on the rocks and coral.

With the reel in gear and about 5 to 6 pounds of drag pressure, he watches the rod tip. Once it begins to bounce, do not pick it up. "Crank like hell with the rod in the holder," he advises.

Muttons possess amazing power, especially early in the fight. But once you raise them to 60- to 70-foot depths, their swim bladders inflate and they float to the surface. Then you can easily hand-line them with the 50-foot leader.

CAPT. KEVIN BEACH, MEXICAN GULF FISHING CO.

Venice, Louisiana
504-451-3886
mgfishing.com

Decades of fishing the Gulf of Mexico have taught Capt. Kevin Beach that nothing beats a big live bait for nailing monster-size red snapper on deep structure. "You can catch 8- to 10-pound snapper easily, but for a big fish you need a bait at least 8 inches long," Beach says.

Beach focuses on wrecks, hard-bottom areas, and oil platforms in 150 to 400 feet of water for snapper in the 25- to 30-pound range. His biggest red to date is 44 pounds.

As do most live-bait specialists, he often spends the first part of each trip either cast-netting menhaden or mullet or jigging for blue runners from his 37-foot Freeman, *Pale Horse*. His favorite bait is menhaden (aka pogies), but they're not hardy; they tend to die off in the livewell later in the day. Blue runners (aka hardtails), on the other hand, are also effective and stay frisky all day.

ILLUSTRATIONS: KEVIN HAND; PHOTOS: JIM HENDRICKS (LEFT), DOUG OLANDER (OPPOSITE)

The Gulf red snapper season is brief, and there are differences in regulations between state and federal waters. Current federal regulations (applicable to most deepwater-structure spots) limit recreational fishermen to nine days beginning on June 1, though licensed charter operations can fish for 45 days. For updates in Louisiana state waters, visit ***wlf.louisiana.gov***; for federal waters, visit ***safmc.net***.

TECHNIQUE

Beach selects the sinker weight based on the amount of current and speed of the drift, using the lightest lead possible to keep the main line vertical. The advantage of having some current is that the leader streams out from the weight to reduce twists and tangles.

He hooks his baits deeply through the shoulder just above the gill plates, and he trims the bottom of the tail to keep it from swimming up and tangling with the main line.

"Still, you have to drop down slowly to prevent tangles, especially if there is no current," he explains. "I like to leave the clicker on while lowering the bait, as this makes you drop as slowly as possible." If there are barracuda around, however, the captain sometimes is forced to drop down more quickly than he likes to get through the voracious teeth.

Beach likes to use PowerPro Depth-Hunter braid for the precision it offers in placing the bait at the right depth. "The line changes colors every 25 feet with hash marks every 5 feet, so you can pay out exactly the amount of line you need to reach the fish," Beach says. "It also keeps you from dropping all the way to the bottom. With all the ropes, chains and snags at the base of oil rigs, that's usually a one-way trip."

Thin-diameter braided line also creates less drag in the water than monofilament, which helps you fish more vertically, Beach says. You want to present the live bait about 7 to 10 feet above the structure, as a big red will not hesitate to swim up from a wreck to eat a big bait. Fish with the reel in gear, and once the fish starts to pull the rod tip down, wind as fast as you can to embed the circle hook.

REGION:
Gulf of Mexico waters off Louisiana

TARGET SPECIES:
Red snapper

DEPTH RANGE:
150 to 400 feet

ROD:
Shimano Trevala 63MH 6-foot-3-inch conventional jigging

REEL:
Shimano Tyrnos 20 lever drag

MAIN LINE:
80- to 100-pound-test PowerPro Depth-Hunter braid

FAVORITE LIVE BAITS:
Menhaden, mullet, blue runners

TERMINAL RIG:
Carolina rig with a 7- to 8-foot leader of 130- to 170-pound-test fluorocarbon, connected to the main line with a ball-bearing swivel

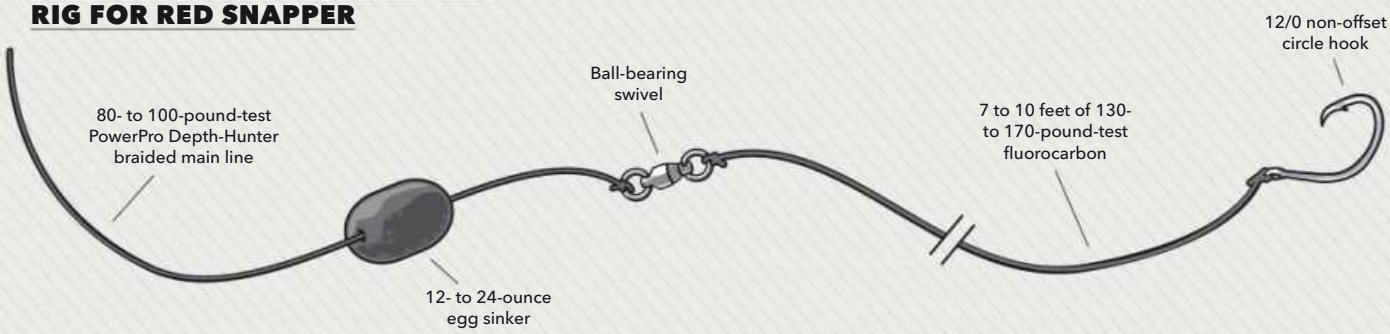
HOOK SIZE/STYLE:
12/0 Mustad 39950 BLN non-offset circle hooks

SINKER SIZE/STYLE:
Egg sinkers from 12 to 24 ounces

Targeting large, powerful fish with live bait amid strong currents and snag-infested structure — sometimes more than a football field below the surface — ranks as one of the most challenging forms of saltwater angling. Yet these deep secrets can help you score big.

To catch trophy-class red snapper in the upper Gulf of Mexico, fish a big live bait on a wreck in 150 to 400 feet of water.

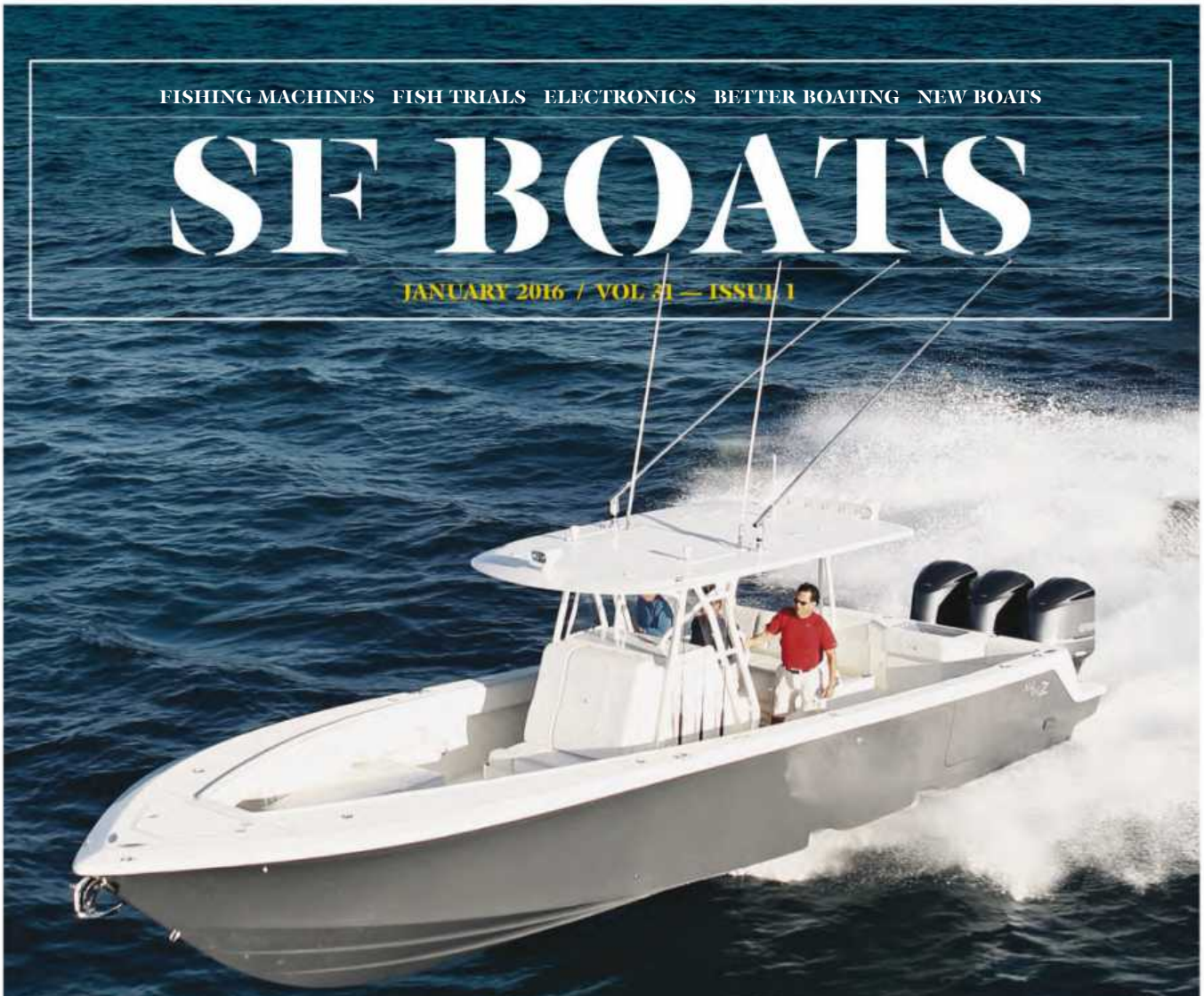
CAPT. KEVIN BEACH'S LIVE-BAIT RIG FOR RED SNAPPER



FISHING MACHINES FISH TRIALS ELECTRONICS BETTER BOATING NEW BOATS

SF BOATS

JANUARY 2016 / VOL 31 — ISSUE 1



SF BOATS SPOTLIGHT

SEAVEE BOATS 390Z

Miami's SeaVee Boats sells factory direct to anglers. As a result, the company builds each boat to its owner's specific wishes. Models range from a 27-foot stepped-hull bay boat to a 43-foot fish-around center-console.

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BY CHRIS WOODWARD

FIVE OFFSHORE VESSELS WITH SIDE-ENTRY DESIGNS

Newest Family-Friendly Trend Comes Standard on Some Models

WHILE SIDE-ENTRY, or dive, doors on center- and dual-consoles began appearing about a decade ago, just recently boat makers released a flurry of models offering this feature as an option, and in some cases as standard equipment.

Side-entry doors allow anglers to boat or release large fish — a nice feature particularly on vessels with high freeboard. These doors also permit quick access for swimmers, divers or even paddleboarders and kayakers, and can ease loading and offloading at floating docks where deck and dock heights match.

A few builders, such as Boston Whaler and Scout, have built swim or beach platforms into the port side of select models. These are essentially doors that open down, but they're less about fishing and more about family fun. To understand more about side entry, I asked five manufacturers to talk about their door design, each highlighting one model that offers this option. (Boats are listed alphabetically.)

GRADY-WHITE 375 FREEDOM

Grady-White's dive door is made using mold inserts instead of by cutting structure; the latter could weaken the hull's integrity.

"We decided to offer the side door [in 2012] because of customer requests," says Shelley Tubaugh, Grady-White's vice president of marketing. "And we're all about incorporating customer wish lists into our products."

Grady originally designed the door for its 335 Freedom model, which was the company's largest dual-console until the 375 debuted in 2013. Because any breach in a hull is serious business, Tubaugh says, Grady took great care in creating the safest design possible.

"One of the most important features of our side door is the fact that it's made using mold inserts instead of cutting away structure, which can weaken the integrity of the boat," she says. "The door opening is formed during the initial creation process of the hull and deck, so it's specially designed from the beginning. Also, we use a one-piece door," which means there's no cap to flip over, "so there's one easy step to

open the door."

Grady's door also opens inward, a very popular choice in today's marine industry, but one that creates tense debate among boat manufacturers. A door that opens into the cockpit can make it easier to board at a dock, but only when you're tied up to a floating dock that's a convenient height. Fixed docks often tower above a boat, particularly at low tide.

Like other builders, Grady incorporated a swim ladder into its door design. A telescoping ladder tucks into a compartment beneath one of the aft cockpit seats, next to the door. It's simple to extend the ladder and lock it into twin stanchions just inside the door.

HYDRASPORTS CUSTOM 5300 SUEÑOS

The new 53-foot center-console from HydraSports Custom comes with two dive doors and eight scuppers aft.

HydraSports Custom began offering a boarding door in 2008, and on its new 53-foot center-console, the company installed two doors, one on each side of the cockpit.

The doors are built into the molds and well reinforced. The boat also features eight scuppers aft — instead of just two — to flush any water splashing onto the deck when the doors are open, says Terri Nuechterlein, HydraSports Custom public relations and marketing manager. "You might notice we show tons of pictures of the boat with the doors open, to reinforce the idea of how functional they are," she says.

The HydraSports Custom door also opens inward and tucks totally under the gunwale cap so it's completely out of the way. Because of that design, the door does feature a "top gate" that flips open and rests on the gunwale. All of the hardware is "submarine-quality," Nuechterlein says.

An outward-opening door might pose a challenge, she says, when an angler tries closing it in heavy seas. It also would prove relatively useless at a floating dock.

"We use these boats ourselves," she says. "And the ease of loading and unloading at the dock, and during playtime at the sandbar, were the big reasons behind the [door]. Then so many more uses became apparent. We use it to land big fish ... and when diving, all that gear comes in so much easier with the dedicated door. Swimming, snorkeling — the list goes on."

JUPITER 38 HFS

Jupiter's first side-entry door was built about seven years ago for a client who requested it to accommodate a wheelchair. "From that point forward, it made sense," says Todd Albrecht, vice president of sales. "It is now offered on every model we build."

Jupiter actually offers two styles of door: drop-down and inboard-swinging. The drop-down is very popular with divers and disabled boaters because the door lowers into the water and features molded-in steps, Albrecht says. The biggest negative for that version is that it's not very dock-friendly.

Jupiter's inboard-swinging dive door is one of two styles the company makes. Dive doors are a popular option for buyers.

The inboard-swinging version features a lift-gate top that flips open onto the gunwale. Then the door swings into the cockpit. A dive ladder attaches to recessed stainless-steel brackets in the floor.

Above: Scuba divers and disabled boaters like Jupiter's drop-down dive door because it lowers into the water and comes with molded-in steps.

According to Albrecht, side doors are the most popular option ordered and the most requested item when the company gets calls from buyers shopping used boats.

"We get a lot of requests from older boaters and for yacht tenders," he says. "[The door] also makes boating a big fish easier, as you're keeping it away from the motors."

SEA FOX 288 COMMANDER

The 288 Commander and its standard side-entry door were both new for Sea Fox in 2015. "We felt that with a vessel of this size, with high freeboard, adding a side door would be a great feature for the avid diver or fisherman," says Brian Gottleib, Sea Fox marketing director.

In fact, when I conducted a Fish Trial of this boat in mid-August, I used the side door to load gear at the dock. Once offshore, our crew brought aboard three king mackerel and promptly released them after photos — all without damaging the fish or endangering our fingers or toes.

Sea Fox builds its 288 Commander with a standard dive door, which facilitates boating and releasing big fish. The overbuilt design allows no flex or rattle.

"Boats move and flex, especially at the gunwales, which can become an issue with a side door," Gottleib says. So Sea Fox researched current side-door designs and created one with overbuilt stainless extrusion and latches. "You get absolutely zero flex or rattle in our design. This also allows for a watertight seal when rough conditions occur in the ocean."

The inward-opening door features a lift-gate top that flops open onto the gunwale. The door itself swings in far enough that it nearly disappears beneath the coaming pad.

SEAVEE 390Z

SeaVee decided in 2007 to design and build an outward- and forward-swinging door, citing safety concerns and angler convenience.

SeaVee introduced its side-door design in 2007 with the 390 CC. The door now comes standard on the 430, 390Z and 370Z, and can be ordered as an option on the 340 and 340Z.

SeaVee chose an outward- and forward-swinging door, primarily because of safety, the company says. "When underway, if the door is left unlatched, it will naturally close by the action of the wind and waves," says John Caballero, SeaVee's marketing director. "If a wave impacts the door, it will be forced shut to keep the sea out."

When an angler tries boating a fish, the door is out of the way, clear of the fish and crew. The outward design also keeps the cockpit uncluttered.

Caballero says the door system was created as a one-piece unit, so there is no top cap. It is built in a closed-molded, resin-transfer molding process so it has no seams that could crack or fail.

The system includes flush-fitting Soss-style hinges and an integral ladder that stows in the deck. The custom-welded stainless hinges remain hidden when the door is closed but allow the door to open fully 180 degrees forward.

Caballero says he has fished in all conditions aboard boats equipped with this door, and in no circumstances has he ever found issue with opening or closing it in heavy seas. In addition, side doors might come in handy for loading and offloading onto land, but only when you tie up to a floating dock that's near water level, he says.

"SeaVee builds boats that are safe and efficient. Every one of our systems, components and design features must work together to offer the best combination of practicality, safety, ease of use and efficiency in a variety of conditions, from fishing far offshore in heavy seas to enjoying a day on the sandbar with family and friends," he says.

"WHEN UNDERWAY, IF THE DOOR IS LEFT UNLATCHED, IT WILL NATURALLY CLOSE BY THE ACTION OF THE WIND AND WAVES. IF A WAVE IMPACTS THE DOOR, IT WILL BE FORCED SHUT TO KEEP THE SEA OUT.

BY CHRIS WOODWARD

SCOUT 231 XS

Tournament Function Plus "A Little More"

The Scout 231 XS bay boat features a proud bow and classic styling outside and in. Its layout offers plenty of room to move and fish comfortably.

When Scout's Alan Lang motored the new 231 XS to a floating dock at Sands Boat Landing in Port Royal, South Carolina, I was struck by how big the 23-footer appeared. I had seen the boat two weeks before, during a Charleston downpour, but this time — on a bright, sunlit October afternoon — the black-hulled bay boat with the proud bow seemed to have grown.

"Is this the same boat I saw before?" I asked Lang, Scout's national sales manager, and James Pate, regional sales rep. Pate confirmed that it was as I handed down my cameras and backpack.

SIZE AND SPACE

I boarded and stowed my gear beneath the console, which is accessed by lifting the forward face of the helm unit using a leash handle at its base. This is the only point at which the 231 shows its actual size: I backed up to the foredeck step to fully open the console.

Otherwise, this Scout fishes big. The foredeck fills the full 8 feet 6 inches of beam width and much of the distance between the console and forepeak. Lang says the design was meant to attract hardcore inshore tournament fishermen who want "a little more."

Lang turned over the helm to local fishing expert Capt. Tuck Scott, with Fly Fish Beaufort, who motored the 231 away from the dock. A forecast light breeze had started picking up mid-day, so Scott looked for a marsh edge protected from the wind.

Just south of the McTeer Bridge in the Beaufort River, he tucked bow-in and deployed the 231's two optional Power-Poles. With both anchors down, the bay boat proved rock-steady (though even with them up, the boat barely reacted to our weight shifts).

Pate, Scott and I unlimbered the three

CHRIS WOODWARD (OPPOSITE TOP), COURTESY SCOUT (3)

spinning rods from the vertical holders next to the console. To match the console's stylish rake, the three holders angle astern. The rod butts rest on a piece of black nonskid; the King StarBoard retaining pieces below the reels and between the first and second guides were obviously designed to be minimal and unobtrusive.

With the rod holders tucked right up against the console, the walkways are remarkably open. Scout also removed the usual undergunwale horizontal rod storage and placed it beneath two cavernous foredeck lockers, so the port and starboard bulkheads remain slender. That design makes the space between the console and hull sides wide enough for an easy do-si-do while still allowing storage ahead for as many as 10 rods up to 9½ feet long.

FISH IN STYLE

Scott dip-netted some bait shrimp from the starboard aft 26-gallon livewell. Pate remarked afterward that we could have easily placed the shrimp in the smaller 11-gallon well that's rather smartly plumbed beneath the foredeck step.

That step also serves its intended purpose, providing a way to mount the high foredeck without using a hiker's lunge. The 231's proud bow, which helps cleave waves and throw spray aside, also means the foredeck rises a good distance from the main deck; its height measured about 18 to 20 inches.

Top: Double hookup! Schoolie redfish had ganged up at this creek mouth. The 231's bow easily hosts two anglers during a hot bite. Above: A transom seat folds flush to form a broad aft deck. Right: The vertical rod holders angle back to match the console.

That high deck also creates tremendous space beneath the hatches for the rod storage and the standard 45-quart Yeti that Scout embeds in a recess beneath the center hatch.

Pate and I threaded our live shrimp onto small hooks beneath popping corks and cast from the bow, where we found plenty of room to work without tangling. We raised the Power-Poles and used the optional MotorGuide Xi5 to search out redfish cruising the oyster beds.

At the next point, we stopped and employed the Xi5's Pinpoint GPS to hold us in place with its virtual anchor. A few test casts later and we found an awaiting school of rat reds poised to ambush our bait.

Although we planned to release anything we caught, I decided to put several legal-size reds into the 26-gallon port aft release well in case we needed them for photos. All hatches, including those above the livewells, come with slam latches. Lift straight up to open the hatch, and simply let the lid fall to close it quietly and easily.

Scout also finishes the surface beneath each lid and includes gaskets for a better seal. The company

PERFORMANCE

POWER ..... Yamaha F300
LOAD ..... 60 gal. fuel, four crew, two full livewells, five batteries
TOP SPEED ..... 59.8 mph @ 6,000 rpm
TIME TO 30 MPH ..... 5.42 sec.
BEST MPG ..... 3.8 @ 33 mph (3,500 rpm)

HULL

LOA ..... 23 ft. 1 in.
BEAM ..... 8 ft. 6 in.
DEADRISE ..... 14 deg.
DRY WEIGHT ..... 2,100 lb. (w/out engine)
DRAFT ..... 12 in. (hull)
FUEL ..... 60 gal.
MAX POWER ..... 300 hp

MSRP ..... $76,417 (base w/ Yamaha F300)

SCOUT BOATS
Summerville, South Carolina
843-821-0068
scoutboats.com

The high bow creates ample storage, including lockable rod boxes and a center hatch for gear and the Yeti cooler. Scout placed a small livewell in the bow step.

attaches gas-assist rams on all hatches except livewells.

FAST AND NIMBLE

Although it's considered sacrilegious aboard some boats to leave the fish biting, we simply had to. We had caught 15 to 20 redfish, but it was time to test the 231's performance and handling.

Scott and I settled into the standard performance leaning post, a unique Scout design that cradles the captain and passenger with padding at the hip. With the standard jack plate and Yamaha F300 trimmed down, but no trim-tab assistance, we launched onto plane and reached 30 mph in about 6 seconds (Yamaha tests show 5.42 seconds, with a time to plane of 3.3 seconds.) On one run, we topped out at 59.8 mph, turning 6,000 rpm while still attaining 1.9 mpg.

If we had carried a lighter load — we ran with four adults, two full livewells, a full tank of fuel and five batteries, plus gear and a cooler — this boat would have easily topped 60 mph. (The F300 turned a 14½-by-21-inch Yamaha Pro Series prop.)

Because this boat's hull features a step design with a pad, I approached turning with caution. I had already trimmed out the engine a bit for optimal planing, which is also crucial for stepped-hull performance. But the 231 showed no ill tendencies, and with the optional power-assist steering, it carved graceful turns at half speed.

Raising the 6-inch jack plate aided planing as well, though I found little need for the standard trim tabs except to high-side the boat in the windblown waters of Port Royal Sound.

If this red had measured a bit longer, it might have gone into the port release well, but it was quickly returned to the bay.

FINISHING TOUCH

Scout clearly steps beyond average imagination to create its fishing boats. The company designers think through the function of every piece of equipment while still demonstrating classic flair.

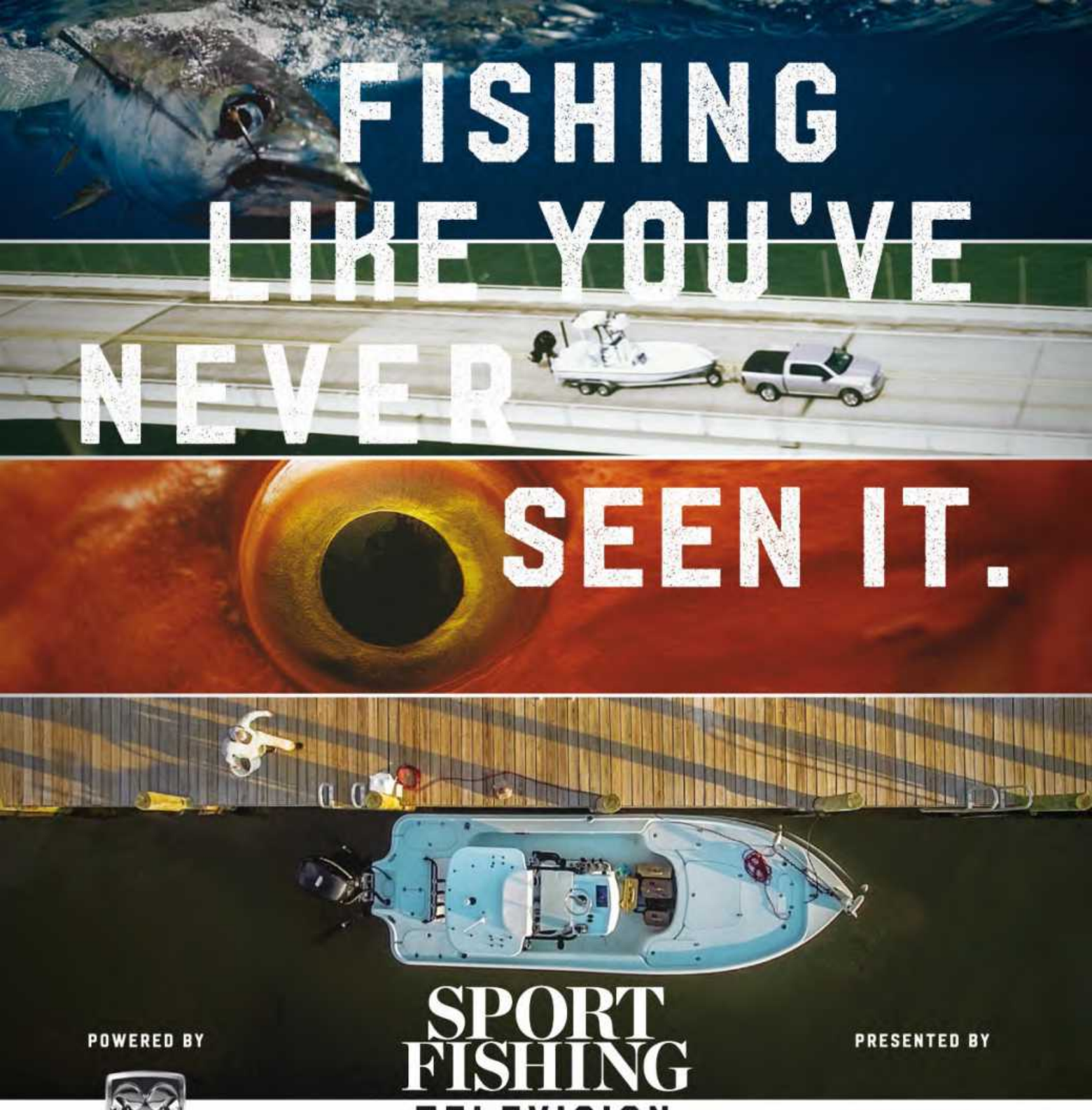
The 231's helm blends dark and light colors for dramatic and purpose-built effect, and my test boat featured a beautifully flush-mounted Garmin 7612xsv 12-inch multifunction display.

Two of the four aft rod holders and two flanking the forward console seat double as cup holders. Scout added a pair of regular rod holders in the aft deck behind the fold-down transom seat.

With its many distinctive touches and bigger-boat feel, I'd say this inshore-tournament bay boat easily delivers on its promise for "a little more."

FOR MORE INFORMATION
about boats, electronics and accessories, visit **sportfishingmag.com/new-boats**.

COURTESY SCOUT (TOP), CHRIS WOODWARD (LEFT)



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BY JIM HENDRICKS

BARKER BOATWORKS 26 OPEN

Combining Quality and Performance with Versatility

A patented Michael Peters-designed twin-step hull lends the Barker 26 Open a remarkably smooth, dry and fuel-efficient ride. Top speed was 57 mph.

The spindly shacks of Stiltsville loomed ahead as Kevin Barker, president of Barker Boatworks, piloted the new 26 Open across the glassy waters of Florida's Biscayne Bay toward the Atlantic.

The game plan on this early-November day was twofold. First we would run out to look for dolphin under the weed lines of the Gulf Stream, and then we would head back to target snook and tarpon along the jetties of Miami's Government Cut.

"The 26 Open is designed for exactly the kind of fishing we're doing today," Barker said. "It's for the angler who wants to fish for tarpon, snook and redfish in the bays, but who also wants to feel comfortable fishing for bluewater species such as dolphin and sails."

The new Barker is based on a patented 25½-foot Michael Peters-designed twin-step hull that introduces a cushion of air under the boat to increase lift, speed and fuel efficiency. Inside, the 26 Open carries a deep deck throughout most of the interior, with abbreviated casting decks in the bow and stern.

BAIT 'ER UP!

The 26 Open's 40-gallon upright main livewell abaft the helm seating is pressurized and features a clear acrylic lid. Friction hinges kept the lid open as we loaded more than a hundred live pilchards from a local bait vendor, who was waiting off the south end of Key Biscayne. An

COURTESY BARKER BOATWORKS / JASON ARNOLD (ABOVE), JIM HENDRICKS (3, OPPOSITE)

The 26 Open dispenses with gauges in favor of fully networked Garmin multifunction displays at both helm stations. You can navigate, find fish and monitor the engine.

aft-facing viewing window lets you keep an eye on the bait.

The 26 Open delivers additional bait capacity with a 15-gallon well in the bow, plus a pair of 15-gallon transom wells. You can also opt for a 40-gallon livewell below the aft cockpit sole.

I stowed my camera bag in the cavernous, front-opening center-console enclosure, and Barker throttled up the Mercury 350 Verado outboard. We headed out, guided by a fully networked Garmin 7616xsv multifunction display. There's redundancy in the form of a second Garmin MFD on the dash for the half-tower helm.

You'll find no gauges per se — not even a Mercury VesselView display. Instead you monitor engine functions on the MFDs. A panel of C-Zone digital switches controls everything from navigation lights to livewell pumps. Meanwhile a trio of LED readouts keeps you posted on the voltage of the

Left: A pressurized 40-gallon livewell abaft the helm seating lets you monitor the bait through an aft-facing viewing window. Right: A sliding "pilot hatch" lets you easily ascend to the second station on the hardtop.

battery banks for the engine, house and trolling motor.

On the ride out, I tried every seat on the boat. With seas running only about a foot, even the high-back seat in front of the console proved comfortable. The twin helm seats offer flip-up bolsters, fold-down armrests and two tiers of footrests at the base of the console. My favorite place to chill is the bench seat that folds open from the aft casting deck.

MAHI MAYHEM

About 8 miles east of Key Biscayne, Barker spotted a weed line, so we set out a pair of trolling lures using the gunwale rod holders in the stern quarters. Five such holders on each side of the 26 Open facilitate techniques such as kite-fishing and drifting, as well as trolling. Each stainless-steel holder also doubles as a drink holder — a touch

PERFORMANCE

POWER	Mercury 350 Verado
LOAD	69 gal. fuel, two crew
TOP SPEED	57 mph @ 6,200 rpm
TIME TO 30 MPH	9.5 sec.
BEST MPG	3.4 @ 37 mph (4,000 rpm)

HULL

LOA	25 ft. 6 in.
BEAM	9 ft. 3 in.
DEADRISE	18 deg.
DRY WEIGHT	Approx. 4,500 lb.
DRAFT	14 in. to 16 in. (motors down)
FUEL	90 gal. standard; 125 gal. optional
MAX POWER	400 hp

MSRP as tested $165,000
(w/ Mercury 350 Verado)

BARKER BOATWORKS
Sarasota, Florida
941-482-3837
barkerboatworks.com

I appreciated as I tried to stay hydrated in the Florida heat.

Barker climbed up to the second station using a uniquely designed sliding "pilot hatch" in the Key West-style hardtop. You can either stand on a special SeaDek-covered platform or sit on an upholstered bench while aloft.

From this vantage point, Barker could keep the boat trolling parallel to the weed line, a technique that soon resulted in our first dolphin hookup. As I battled the fish closer to the boat, Barker

The massive insulated fish locker under the foredeck of the 26 Open kept ice and our catch of mahi nicely chilled, despite the sweltering Florida heat.

spotted a squad of schoolmates closing fast. This was his cue to descend, pull a spinning rod from the row of five vertical holders on the side of the console, pin on a live pilchard, and cast. "Hookup!" he announced almost instantly.

I extracted a gaff from the 26 Open's undergunwale rod rack to land the trolled fish, then switched to bait too. I had barely dropped the pilchard in the water when a mahi inhaled it. It jumped next to the boat and landed on the deck. When Barker told me that the 26 Open was built to catch fish, I never guessed he meant it literally.

The Barker 26 Open readily accepts a bow-mounted electric trolling motor. A pair of Power-Pole anchors fit well on each side of the Mercury 350 Verado outboard.

As we hooked more dolphin, I noted how the layout lent itself to maneuvering and following a fish. Padded coaming bolsters encircling the interior cushioned my knees. We kept eight of the mahi and iced them in the massive insulated forward fish locker.

With fish in the box, we headed in to try for snook and tarpon in Government Cut. Boat traffic leading to the inlet churned the sea into a liquid potato patch. Yet the 26 Open met each wave with smooth confidence, riding cleanly through the confused seas. Barker was able to fine-tune the ride using the Bob's Machine Shop jack plate.

INSHORE INSIGHT

Barker chose to work the outside of the south jetty using the bow-mounted Minn Kota Ulterra Riptide trolling motor. The auto stow-and-deploy feature lowered the motor, and we were underway quickly using the Minn Kota i-Pilot wireless remote control.

Barker stepped up to the forward casting platform using one of two steps on the bow deck. From there he scouted for cruising snook or tarpon. I used the aft deck to cast to the base of the jetty.

Once we reached a promising spot, Barker engaged Spot Lock on the i-Pilot remote to hold us in position. In shallower water, we could have used the twin 8-foot Power-Pole anchors. There's also an anchor locker in the forepeak that will hold at least 300 feet of line.

Fish were biting, but unfortunately not our target species. We caught jacks and houndfish and got clipped more than once. Barker suspected kingfish.

As we cruised home, I checked out other features of the 26 Open, including a pair of locking compartments in the forward gunwales designed for fly rods up to 10 feet. A rack for seven rods spans the aft edge of the hardtop. I was particularly impressed with the fit and finish throughout.

NUMBERS GAME

We gathered performance data inside Biscayne Bay. Turning a Mercury Mirage Plus 19-inch-pitch stainless-steel three-blade propeller, the 26 Open jumped on plane in 5.7 seconds and reached 30 mph in 9.5 seconds.

We clocked a top speed of 57 mph, turning 6,200 rpm, where the Mercury 350 Verado burned 30 gallons per hour for 1.9 mpg. The 26 Open achieved its best fuel efficiency at 37 mph (4,000 rpm), where the engine consumed 10.9 gallons per hour for 3.4 mpg. That equates to a remarkable range of 306 miles based on the standard 90-gallon fuel capacity.

With its first model, the 26 Calibogue Bay, Barker quickly gained an enviable reputation for quality, ride and fuel efficiency. Its second model, the 26 Open, adds exceptional versatility, making this a boat that's easy to love.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
about boats, electronics and accessories, visit **sportfishingmag.com/new-boats**.

JIM HENDRICKS (3)

A LEGENDARY SITE. AN ICONIC SHOW.
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BY CHRIS WOODWARD

ON THE GRID

MORE AIS-EQUIPPED VESSELS AND POTENTIAL SYSTEM UPGRADES COULD ENCOURAGE INCREASED ANGLER USE

Before I drive a long distance, I usually open a map application on my smartphone and plot my course. The app estimates the time my drive should take, and it shows me any construction or reported accidents along the way. That kind of real-time routing information can seriously affect the tone of my trip.

Marine navigation might be less advanced right now, but it's headed in that direction. Automatic Identification System, or AIS, units currently display real-time vessel traffic. In the future, they're expected to improve the dependability of key aids to navigation — such as buoys and markers — and deliver important safety messages in real time.

For anglers in particular, one principal AIS advantage lies in using the electronics to locate stationary vessels that might hold bait or game fish like cobia and kingfish, or to locate shrimpers or even a fleet of vessels fishing in a group. And that benefit is about to expand.

NEW REGULATIONS

Currently, about 10,000 vessels are required to use AIS continually while on the water, according to the U.S. Coast Guard, which finalized a rule in early 2015 that expanded carriage requirements.

Affected mariners have until March 2, 2016, to outfit. But chances are, many already have. In addition, says South Florida tournament captain George Mitchell, "Regardless of whether the government requires it, a lot of private companies require it, and insurance companies can require it for safety purposes."

Vessels mandated by the Coast Guard to carry the gear include commercial vessels greater than 65 feet in length. Commercial fishing vessels that meet those parameters were once exempted, but the 2015 rule adds them to the mandate list. Similarly, commercial vessels over 65 feet that are certified to carry fewer than 150 passengers for hire must also comply.

AIS TRANSCEIVERS

FURUNO
FA50

GARMIN
AIS600

HUMMINBIRD
TX AIS

RAYMARINE
AIS650

SIMRAD
NAIS-400

© MICHAEL KAI / CORBIS (TOP LEFT)

"AIS is probably the most beneficial piece of safety equipment you can have on the water today," says Jorge Arroyo, AIS regulatory project officer for the Coast Guard. "Its primary purpose is collision avoidance. It allows you to know and contact the people aboard the other vessel and find out what they intend to do and what their status is."

Arroyo says that the carriage rules now cover about 80 percent of the U.S. commercial fleet. No further regulations are being considered to require more vessels — whether commercial or recreational — to use AIS. But as the agency begins using AIS technology to improve its communication with mariners, more anglers might choose to voluntarily equip themselves.

FISHING FUNCTIONS

"AIS sales have been pretty steady for us all along," says Jim McGowan, Raymarine's marketing manager. "The interest has been increasing as it's in the news and people have become more aware of it."

Mitchell, who uses a Furuno unit, says AIS simplifies his fishing strategy particularly in the south Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico. "When we were in the Gulf, we could look at a blip on the radar, and if we overlaid our plotter on the radar and didn't see a rig or buoy, we knew it was a boat," he says. "We would target-track it with radar to get its speed. If it was about 1.3 knots, we knew it was a shrimper."

Now the bigger boats, including many shrimpers, will have to use AIS. And the carriage requirement specifies continual use.

Mitchell also uses AIS to identify ships and call them on the VHF radio. "Usually their radio guys love talking to fishermen," he says, "and they'll fill you in with all kinds of information at their location," such as the existence of bait or weed lines.

Raymarine's latest software creates caution zones around AIS targets in busy port areas. Most black-box AIS units mount belowdecks or in a console and are wired into a display screen.

UNIT CHOICES

AIS units come in two classes: Class A (mostly for commercial use, and more expensive) and Class B (mostly for recreational use). Some companies make stand-alone Class B AIS units that sport their own screen; others make black-box add-ons that are placed belowdecks or in a console and plugged into onboard electronics; and still others make fixed-mount VHF radio units with internal AIS.

One advantage to black-box units is their ability to display AIS targets on a chart-plotter screen where you can overlay radar and other information. On the other hand, the VHF-AIS combos might be the simplest solution. AIS uses a VHF frequency to transmit vessel information. Therefore, with some combos, you need only a splitter or an onboard network connection to make your VHF antenna double as an AIS antenna.

Class B units cost from $150 to about $1,300, while VHF-AIS combos are in the $200 to $800 range.

Because of this radio-frequency functionality, the range of AIS is limited to line of sight, or about 20 miles. By definition, AIS units receive *and* send. However, some companies sell lower-cost receive-only products that can show an angler where the traffic is located without sharing his vessel's position.

"That's great because you can see," McGowan says. "But you're not contributing to overall safety."

Raymarine and others do build Class B transceivers with a silent-mode feature, which allows anglers to go dark at a favorite fishing spot, if they choose, and only receive signals from other vessels. Once they're in transit again, they can resume sending.

So while the number of commercial vessels running AIS has been ramping up, manufacturers say that voluntary recreational use has yet to see any spikes. With future AIS functions coming, however, and the promise of both safety and fishing advantages, anglers might warm to the idea of staying on the grid.

To comment on what you'd like to see with regard to future navigation and AIS, please visit ***navcen.uscg.gov/pdf/Future_of_Navigation_Feedback.pdf.***

"AIS IS PROBABLY THE MOST BENEFICIAL PIECE OF SAFETY EQUIPMENT YOU CAN HAVE ON THE WATER TODAY. ITS PRIMARY PURPOSE IS COLLISION AVOIDANCE.

BY JIM HENDRICKS

OUTBOARD SETUP

PROPER RIGGING HELPS OPTIMIZE PERFORMANCE

I recently re-powered my 21½-foot center-console with a 200 hp outboard and assisted in the installation so I might better understand the nuances of setting up the motor.

Of course, most boating anglers don't install their own outboards. On many new boats, power comes pre-installed. That means outboards are rigged and fine-tuned to optimize performance right out of the gate.

Other boats, however, are delivered without power, and the dealer does the outboard installation. A dealer usually handles re-powers as well.

Customers are wise to rely heavily on the advice of their marine engine dealer. Yet it's good to know the basics of outboard setup so you understand, for example, why the dealer might recommend changing the height of the new outboard.

Based on what I learned in the process of wrenching on outboards and talking with representatives from major engine brands, here are topics you might want to discuss with the dealer who rigs your next motor. To keep things simple, I focus largely on single-outboard applications, but the same principles apply to multiengine installations.

If you're re-powering an older boat, have the transom checked for rot once the old motor is off. An aging boat with laminated plywood in the transom (most new boats use advanced coring materials and lamination processes) is prone to deterioration over time from water seeping into the wood. Ask your dealer to check the structural integrity of the transom. If the transom is bad, you need to decide whether to rebuild it before the new power is installed or look for a new boat, depending on the cost-benefit analysis of the repairs and new motor versus the price of another boat.

This is also a good time to replace elements such as a corroded transom rail cap or other pieces you can't otherwise access with the motor installed.

If the dealer tells you the

Setting an outboard at the optimum height boosts speed and fuel efficiency. Many bay boats like the one pictured above feature jack plates that let you easily adjust the engine height, not only to avoid dragging the bottom, but also to maximize running performance.

COURTESY SUZUKI, JIM HENDRICKS (OPPOSITE)

Outboard brackets feature a series of vertically aligned holes that let you adjust the height of the motor on the transom. Each hole represents a ¾-inch change in elevation.

transom is sound, make sure he uses a top-quality marine bedding compound designed for use below the waterline, such as 3M 4000 or BoatLife LifeSeal, to seal the bolt holes when installing the new motor. This will prevent water intrusion. Avoid high-strength sealants such as 3M 5200, or else you'll almost have to pry off the engine with a crowbar on future re-powers. If re-powering, insist on all new bolts, washers and nuts, as the old hardware may have corroded, stretched or fatigued during the time you ran your old engine.

OUTBOARD HEIGHT

This is one of the most critical elements of setup, and that's why outboards have a series of vertically aligned mounting holes on the motor bracket, allowing for adjustment of the engine height. Some bay boats and flats skiffs also have jack plates to facilitate adjustments in outboard height.

If the outboard is too low, it creates excessive drag, which cuts into speed and fuel efficiency. If it's too high, the propeller tends to ventilate, losing its bite on the water and blowing out while turning and in steep seas.

"If the prop consistently ventilates when heading down a steep wave, the outboard is probably set too high," says Dean Corbisier, advertising and public relations manager for Suzuki Marine.

A dealer might guess at the optimum height by aligning the anti-ventilation plate slightly above or at the same level as the bottom of the boat. Or he might rely on his experience in rigging the same boat-and-motor combinations.

Sometimes, when re-powering with the same model motor, you can determine the best height for your outboard before you take off the old one, assuming the old engine is still running well, says Corbisier.

"To find out if your existing outboard is set at the best possible height, start with the engine in idle, and trim the outboard out one-half to nearly full trim," Corbisier explains. "Then safely accelerate at a brisk pace." If the propeller does not ventilate during this exercise, the engine is set too low on the transom, which means you probably want to raise it a peg or two. If it ventilates, you can likely use the same mounting holes for a same-model replacement, says Corbisier.

GEAR-CASE CHANGES

The relative size of the new engine's gear case might call for a change in outboard height, says Chris Chapman, manager of outboard applications for Mercury Marine. Chapman points to Mercury's original Verado and OptiMax outboards, which featured 4.8-inch-diameter gear cases. With a few exceptions, these models now feature larger, 5.44-inch-diameter gear cases for greater durability when powering today's supersize center-consoles.

"The bigger cases create more lift and run higher than the older, smaller ones," Chapman explains. So if the replacement Verado or OptiMax has the larger gear case, you want to mount it at least one hole higher (placing the outboard lower) than the previous motor for optimum fuel efficiency and speed.

But, Chapman warns, "You definitely don't want the anti-ventilation plate below the bottom of the boat." It acts like a planing surface that lifts the stern and pushes the bow downward.

PROP CONSIDERATIONS

The combination of setup parameters — including horsepower, outboard height and gear-case diameter — will also affect the choice of propeller. "It's all interrelated," says Corbisier. "Each element influences the other."

Generally speaking, if you raise the engine height, you can add propeller pitch, the theoretical linear distance that a propeller travels with each revolution. "Adding pitch can further improve fuel efficiency and speed," Corbisier points out.

Yet the converse also holds true. "If you need to lower the outboard, you might also need to go with less propeller pitch," he adds.

Ultimately, my experience and research taught me that effective outboard setup is a combination of educated guesswork and field-testing. Only through sea trials and subsequent adjustments can you fine-tune outboard performance. Thank goodness major boatbuilders do all of this for us before delivering the finished product.

"IF THE OUTBOARD IS TOO LOW, IT CREATES EXCESSIVE DRAG, WHICH CUTS INTO SPEED AND FUEL EFFICIENCY. IF IT'S TOO HIGH, THE PROPELLER TENDS TO VENTILATE, LOSING ITS BITE ON THE WATER AND BLOWING OUT WHILE TURNING AND IN STEEP SEAS.

CREVALLE BOATS 26 BAY

BY CHRIS WOODWARD

THIS CENTRAL FLORIDA builder says it designed the new 26 Bay as a fanatical-fishing and family-friendly vessel. It features 16 degrees of deadrise with Carolina flare at the bow for a dry, smooth ride, and a wide flip-up transom seat.

Fishing amenities include storage for 10 7½-foot rods in the lockable foredeck hatches and racks for four 8-foot rods under the gunwales, as well as three livewells, including two 28-gallon aft release wells with aeration and a 12-gallon well forward.

Two standard removable 72-quart coolers provide separate locations for the day's catch and the food and drinks. Eight cup holders ensure ample locations to stow an open beverage. Built-in lockers for required safety gear keep the console and other dry-storage areas clear for the seemingly endless accessories families carry aboard.

All hatches are finished inside and out and come with friction hinges. The helm features a standard JBL stereo, SeaStar Solutions hydraulic steering with tilt helm, and Lenco trim-tab switches with LED indicators.

Crevalle also offers an optional premium leaning post that comes with a tackle station, cutting boards and a slide-out Yeti cooler.

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA	25 ft. 6 in.
BEAM	8 ft. 6 in.
DRY WEIGHT	3,100 lb. (w/out engine)
DRAFT	12-14 in.
TRANSOM DEADRISE	16 deg.
MSRP	$82,350 (w/ 250 hp outboard)

NORTH RIP 30

BY CHRIS WOODWARD

NORTH RIP CONSULTED Rhode Island tournament fisherman Capt. Jack Sprengel, of East Coast Charters and Team Shimano Sportfishing, to design the layout and equipment for its new 30-foot center-console — from the perfectly spaced rod holders to the spacious fish lockers and livewells.

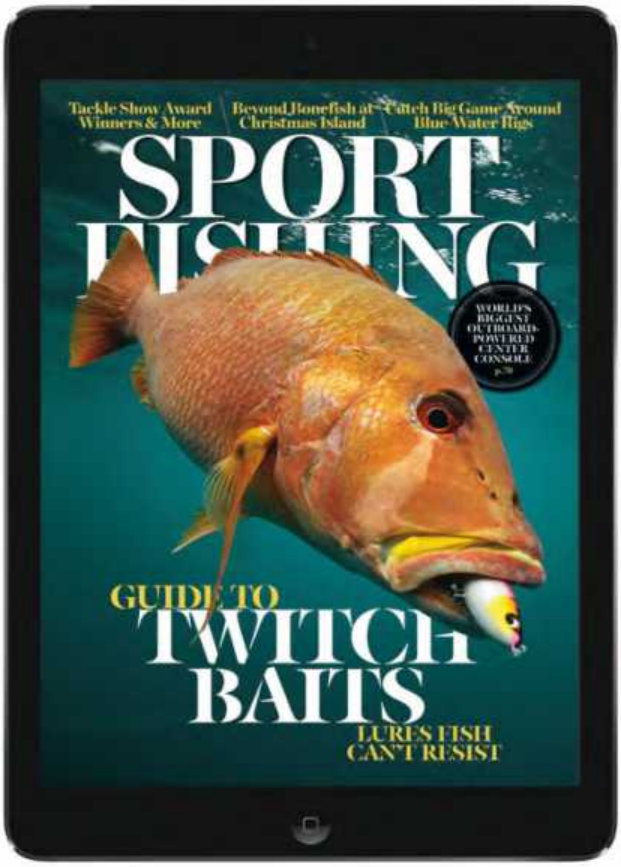
The North Rip 30 comes with a walk-through tuna door in the transom; 48 cubic feet of macerated, insulated fish boxes; lockable rod storage; a 42-gallon livewell plus the option for two additional wells; and saltwater washdowns fore and aft.

This New England builder employs resin-infused technology (vacuum bagging) to create a precise resin-to-fiber ratio in the hull and deck. The 30 also features a one-piece carbon-fiber-reinforced structural grid.

Standard equipment includes full-length coaming bolsters, a custom T-top with port and starboard big-game hoisting points, tackle storage in the leaning post, all-around LED lighting, and a 300-gallon fuel tank. North Rip offers optional underwater lighting; a wet bar, grill and refrigerator; and forward seating with a table.

SPECIFICATIONS

LOA	30 ft.
BEAM	9 ft. 9 in.
DRY WEIGHT	8,000 lb.
DRAFT	19 in.
TRANSOM DEADRISE	22 deg.
MSRP	$224,900 (w/ twin Yamaha F250s, introductory price)



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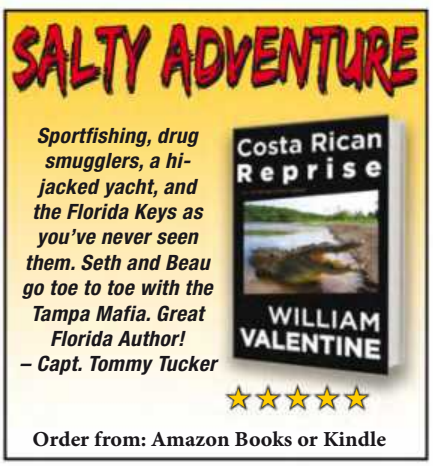

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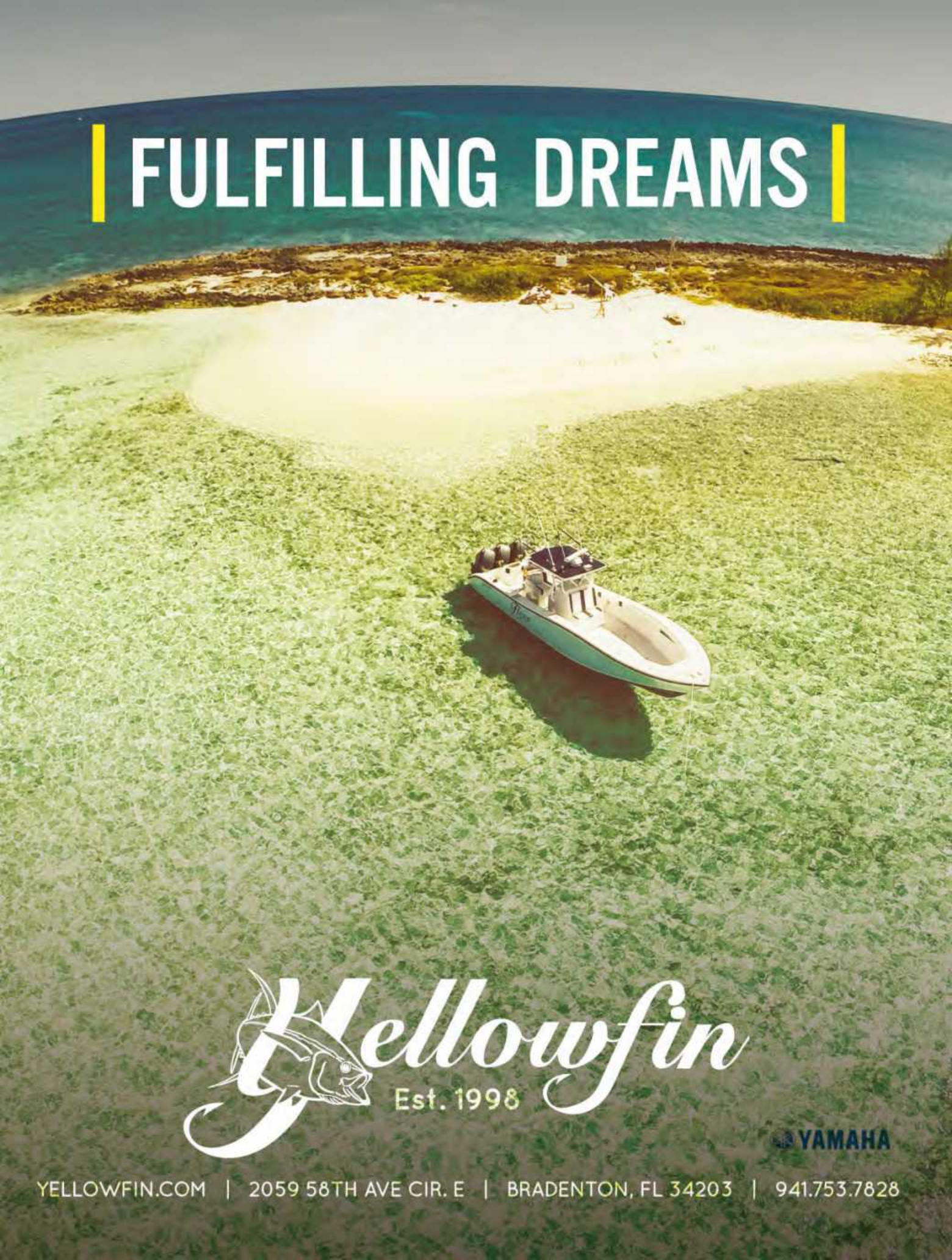
LAST CAST

White-knuckle ride: Fishermen return through the Rio Pardo inlet near Carnaveiras, Brazil, in conditions not unusual when stiff northeasterlies blow in the spring months. (It's a great occasion to wear a lifejacket.)

PHOTOGRAPH BY
ANTONIO "TUBA" AMARAL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